

# WILD TIMES

30 YEARS ON THE THAI BORDER



# JOHN SPIES





# MYANMAR (BURMA)

United Wa State Army  
controlled area

# THAILAND

Doi Tai Leng  
Headquarters of the  
Shan State Army







John spraying 2,4,5-T on Australian weeds in 1975 ( Beached).



I was 22 and spoke no Thai when I met Diew in Chiang Mai in 1977 (Seduced).



Nai Harn Beach on Phuket Island, 1977 (Beached)



Cranston and John at Nai Harn beach in 1977 (Beached).





Diew leads a trek through poppy fields in Chiang Rai Province (Tribes and Tribulations).



Ban Pasang, an Akha village near the border in Chiang Rai province. Bandits from this village held us at gunpoint (Tribes and Tribulations).



Mule caravan in a Yunnanese Haw village north of Chiang Mai (Borderline Trekking).



Chinese Kuomintang soldiers in Chiang Rai Province (Seduced).





Lahu village in Pang Mapha (Borderline Trekking).



Traditional Lua village in southern Mae Hong Son Province in 1980 (Piecing Together the Past).



Ban Huai Hea in 1979 (Lahu Life).



Ban Louk Kaow Lahm, near the Spirit Well (Paralysis).





The massive river tunnel inside Tham Lod (Underground).



Prehistoric rock painting in an upper-level cavern of Tham Lod in 1985, before a Shan boy 'cleaned' it (Piecing Together the Past).



The downstream entrance chamber of Tham Lod where Peter waited for the twilight bird and bat spectacle while Ewa left to walk back to Cave Lodge alone (The Bloody Blanket).



Ewa, Peter and Janette waded through the river inside Tham Lod to reach the evening bird and bat show (Murder and Mayhem).





An Akha woman, a recent immigrant from Burma, at her new village site in Ban Mae Nam Khun (Converted).



Black Lahu girl in Ban Huai Hea (Lahu Life).



Iguay in 1979 (Lahu Life).



Betel-chewing Black Lahu girl from Ban Huai Hea (Lahu Life).





John with a soldier of the Shan State Army inside Burma's Shan State near the border with Mae Hong Son (Seduced).



A Mien hilltribe woman scratches poppy seed pods to release the plant's milky sap. The sap thickens and browns in the sun (Borderline Trekking).



Scraping raw opium from slit poppy bulbs is a labour intensive task in the hills of the Golden Triangle (Seduced).





Snow-caked Lodges in the Annapurna Sanctuary in 2000 (Jaundiced).



Dancing in Ban Guet Sam Sip during the Lisu New Year celebration in 1984 (Blind Drunk).



Lost in Nepal near the Helumbu valley on a trek with Paco (in yellow) in 1980 (Jaundiced).





Diew with Public Security in Sipsong Panna, near the Burma border in China in 1982 (Busted).



The bridge over the Nam Lang after a flood washed away the approach, the day before Mindy' seizure in 1991 (Close to the Edge).



The overloaded Land Rover on an Australian caving expedition in Pang Mapha (Ambulance).



My decrepit Land Rover was rattling apart (Ambulance).





Dog paws outside an Akha village gate repel malicious spirits that might harm the village's pigs and chickens (Tribes and Tribulations).



The Hmong shaman in Ban Paeng, who survived a Tiger bite on the side of his head, performs a divination ceremony that involves sacrificial pigs and chickens (Living and Dying).



A seven-metre-long Pi Maen coffin in a cave in Pang Mapha. More than 80 caves have preserved the remains of similar pre-historic teak coffins (Piecing Together the Past).





Exploring Tham Mae Lana (Troglobitic).



Exiting Tham Nam Lang after 54 hours underground (Caving).



Diew standing under a massive flowstone formation (Caving).



Diew with rare orange aragonite stalactites (Troglobitic).





Kerry at the first waterfall in Tham Susa in 1990 (Satisfaction). Kerry discovered a new genus of cavefish, *Cryptotora*, on this waterfall in 1985 (Paralysis).



Abseiling the waterfall drop in Waterfall Cave, the scene of the first underground fatality in Pang Mapha (Lifelines).



Kerry's successful ascent of the second waterfall inside Tham Susa in 1990 (Satisfaction).





Stalagmite in a newly-explored Thai cave (Underground).



Exploring new cave in Tham Mae Lana (Troglobitic).



Hilltribe village in the highlands of Mae Hong Son Province, northern Thailand (Borderline Trekking).



A Pwo Karen maiden weaves a blanket on a backstrap loom. A heroin addict stole our collection of exquisite hilltribe textiles (Head for the Hills).





Diew leading a hilltribe trek in 1980 (Borderline Trekking).



Shoot from the giant *mai bo* (Bamboo).



Traditional Black Lahu haircut in Ban Huai Hea in 1979 (Lahu Life).



Tai Lue woman with gold-capped teeth in Sipsong Panna, China (Busted).



Diew relaxes in our brand new teak, bamboo and leaf Lodge in 1985 (Head for the Hills).





Traditional Black Lahu haircut using a sharp knife (Lahu Life).



Hilltribe boys in the 1980's brandished M16's and muzzle-loading rifles (Lahu Life and Blind Drunk).



Diew with Ja Chee, Iguay's son, in Ban Huai Hea in 1980 (Lahu Life).



Iguay's stepdaughter and her baby in Ban Huai Hea in 1979 (Lahu Life).





Amee, Iguay's wife, smoked opium when she was 10 month's pregnant (Lahu Life).



Diew scrapes raw opium from mature bulbs in a poppy field of our Black Lahu family (Lahu Life).



Po Po's husband, Ja Yor, weighs putrid fish to swap for opium. The Shan addict killed the fish with DDT in a stream and preserved then in a tube of bamboo with salt (Living and Dying).



A Black Lahu opium addict smokes a mix of raw opium, pipe scapings and aspirin powder. The girl applied lipstick and baby powder to her face for decoration (Overdose).





Iguay's granddaughters feeding the family's pigs and chickens outside our house in Ban Huai Hea in 1979 (Lahu Life).



Black Lahu girls from Ban Huai Hea with traditional haircuts (Lahu Life).



Iguay (left) and another elder draw a lost soul across a symbolic bridge on a path outside their village (Lahu Life).





Many hilltribe children smoked rough home-grown tobacco in the 1970's and 1980's (Lahu Life).



Lua from remote villages in southern Mae Hong Son Province wore their traditional hand-woven clothing and ornaments in the 1980's (Piecing Together the Past).



The Lua are the original inhabitants of the highlands in northern Thailand. The people of Ban Chang Mor once rode their elephants to Chiang Mai every year (Piecing Together the Past).





**Bamboo raft trip with Top Deck on the rain-swollen Nam Khong (Bamboo).**



**Camping in bad air in Tham Susa after a gruelling bamboo rafting descent of the Nam Khong (Bamboo).**



**Elephants at the downstream entrance of Tham Lod after a traverse of the cave tunnel (Something Different).**



**Kayaking on the Pai River (Something Different).**





**Cave Lodge in 1985. The bamboo floor is near completion (Head for the Hills).**



**Black Lahu friends from Ban Huai Hea constructed our first roof in 1984 from bamboo and cabbage palm leaves (Head for the Hills).**



**John, Dave, Diew and Paco take a break from the building of the teak frame of Cave Lodge in 1984 (Head for the Hills).**



**John baking chickens in the wood-fired ovens that caused the devastating fire at Cave Lodge in 1990 (Adrenaline).**





Nung and Diew at Cave Lodge (Adrenaline).



Mindy at the Cave Lodge millennium party (Any Excuse).



Black Lahu maidens wait for a dance to start (Lahu Life).



John high on caving (Caving).





Cave Lodge kitchen, Christmas Eve, 1987. We cooked with firewood and used kerosene lanterns for light (Ambulance).



Diew, Mindy and Shane with a Cave Lodge Santa Claus (Any Excuse).



New Year at Cave Lodge, 1987. Bruce (stooping) tries to keep an eye on Paul (blue jacket) (Ambulance).





A Hmong funeral. The corpse, dressed in a special costume, can lie on a bier inside the family house for up to seven days (Living and Dying).



John in Ban Huai Hea in 1979. Iguay's son Kali, on John's right, is now the village headman (Lahu Life).



The village blacksmith in Ban Huai Hea admires a photograph of himself for the first time in his life (Lahu Life).

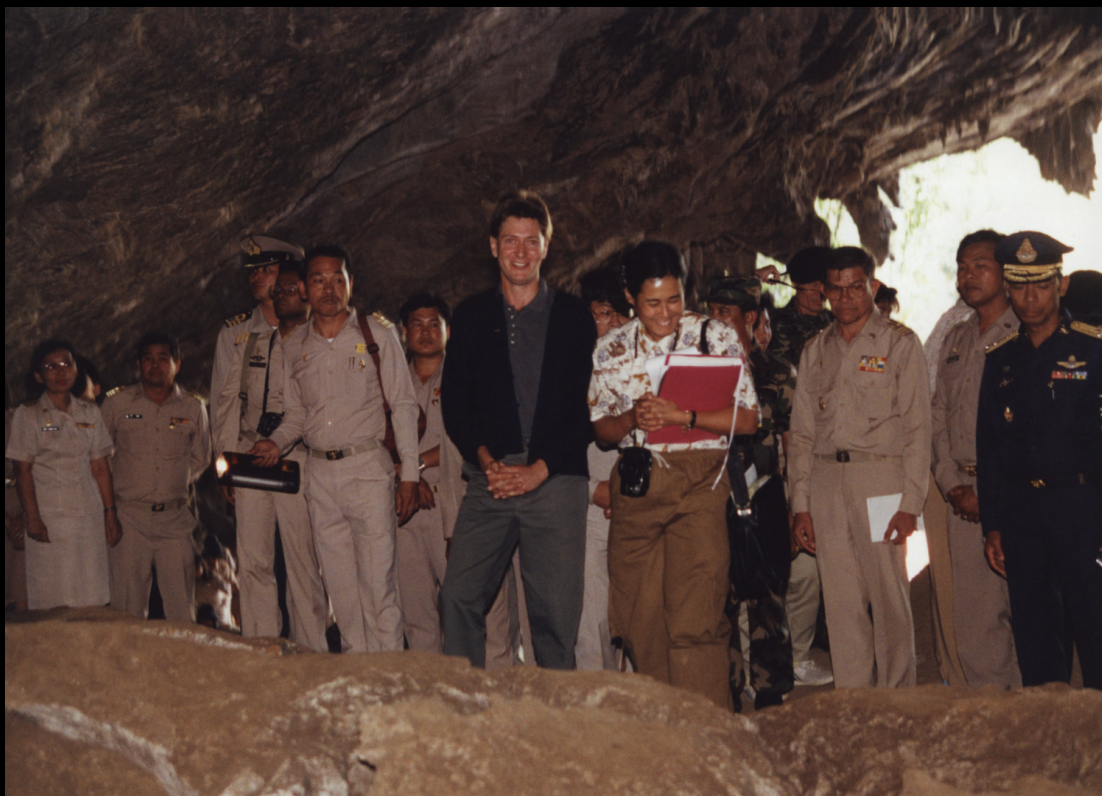


Diew and John with Black Lahu children in 1987 (Borderline trekking).





**Massive flowstone formation in Tham Nam Lang (All the Way).**



**John escorting HRH Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn through Tham Lod (Lodge Life).**





Padaung (Long Neck Karen) girl in Mae Hong Son (Dog Food).



Raw opium on a mature poppy seed pod. Highland farmers slit the pods to release the sap after the petals have dropped (Seduced).



Mindy plays with her cousin Kate at Cave Lodge (Head for the Hills).





A Lisu betel chewer with stained teeth and lips (Lahu Life).



Lisu girl with a handful of guts from a pig her father butchered (Dog Food).



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# THE BLOODY BLANKET

A blast from a muzzle-loading rifle boomed across the mist-clogged valley. The drongos and warblers in the forest canopy fell silent. The villagers' roosters cut short their crowing and cocked their heads in nervous jerks. Nothing moved as the explosion reverberated off towering limestone cliffs north of the village. I sprang out of bed, grabbed a shotgun from the wall and thumbed the safety.

Gripping the cold steel of the barrel with my left hand, I slumped back onto my lumpy kapok mattress, aimed at the door and waited. Diew huddled against me under a stack of thin blankets. I could sense the tension rippling through her body. Mindy, our two-year-old daughter, stirred beside her, and I whispered 'shush'.

A sudden, piercing barrage of high-pitched shouting in Shan burst through the open teak shutters behind us, and I flinched reflexively. Diew swore under her breath, and I felt her muscles slacken. I lifted my finger from the trigger and smiled at her spontaneous outburst of profanity. Some boys from the village had shot a squirrel; they would singe its fur then grill the scrawny carcass before pounding it into a paste with chilli and salt for breakfast.

I wrapped a grey Chinese blanket around my shoulders, stepped out of the bedroom and bounced across the split-bamboo floor of Cave Lodge. I stacked some kindling, blew the embers on the dirt hearth in the centre of the room, and squatted close to ward off the chill. Plumes of wood smoke, with a scent of fresh pine, filtered through the leaf roof. I balanced a soot-blackened kettle over the flames and waited until the steam rattled and lifted the lid. As usual, I let the creek water boil for a few minutes.

I savoured the early winter mornings in my mountain home near the Burmese border, and the moments of solitude before guests filled the wooden benches around the fireplace. Outside



the open-fronted room, swirls of mist wafted through the evergreen forest on the slope above the river. The liquid babble of the Nam Lang in the valley below, and the clacking of teak and bamboo bells dangling from the buffaloes that grazed its banks, helped calm my frayed nerves. Downstream, a gibbon whooped in the forest near where the river flowed into Lod Cave. Living next to a village overstocked with weapons, the gibbon, like me, was lucky to be alive.

The year, 1988, had turned catastrophic. A series of disasters over the last months of 1987 had climaxed in an appalling incident, and my family and I feared for our safety. I loved the guesthouse I had built with my blistered and sometimes bloodied hands, but I felt despondent and ready to run. The temptation to escape and slink back into the security of the Australian home I had abandoned in 1976 was growing each day.

I poured a cup of strong mountain Arabica. The sun had crested the eastern ridge and was gradually dissolving the mist in the valley. A couple of teenage girls, my Burmese–Shan staff, arrived and started to sweep the floor of the lodge. A few early risers wandered up from their bungalows and joined me by the fire. Over our conversation, I heard the rolling crunch of a vehicle descending the gravel driveway from the village. Diew, my partner of more than 10 years, called out in Northern Thai from the kitchen at the back of the house, ‘Mee siang rot mar ner. Mar chao te chao wa.’ She had heard the approaching vehicle and remarked that it was early for visitors. I stood up and stretched, then sauntered over to the front steps of the lodge.

The Royal Thai Police Commander from Mae Hong Son and Captain Somchai strode towards me from their brown and white Isuzu pickup. Silver stars and coloured bars studded their immaculate, body-hugging uniforms. Polished shoes and steel pistols in black holsters gleamed in the sunlight.

The commander glanced at my bare feet before working his way up my baggy farmers pants to a dingy T-shirt. I held my palms together under my chin and bowed in a wai. Using Northern Thai, I politely asked the officers the reason for their visit. Somchai, the local police chief, spoke in soft Central Thai.



‘John’, he said, ‘we have come to arrest you for murder’. The words blasted into my gut. He looked up into my eyes and smiled. I emptied my lungs with an audible whoosh.

‘You’re joking, right?’ The captain shook his head.

‘Murder?’ I swallowed. ‘Me?’

A month had passed since the captain and I stood together in a dry creek bed beside the body of Ewa, an Australian tourist who had stayed at the lodge. Somchai had handed me a camera and told me to photograph the murder scene, while a medic inspected the corpse. The horrific images I had captured on film had been haunting me ever since. The police investigation had dragged on, without any suspects – until now.

Somchai clutched a garbage bag in his right hand. Something half-filled the bag and stretched the thin plastic. The captain raised it to waist height and grinned.

A surreal premonition flashed through my mind. This mad magician in a police uniform was about to pluck out a severed head, or something worse. I gulped and shook my head in denial of my warped thoughts. The captain reached deep inside his black bag. The conjurer inside my head whispered, ‘For my next trick...’, while I braced myself.

Somchai drew out a grey blanket, gripping one corner between his thumb and fingertips. An adrenaline-laced flashback fired another shot into my stomach. This was not a trick, nor a joke. The bloodstains on the blanket had solidified into a black crust.

The captain lifted the rank rag under my nose, and a smirk spread over his face.

‘This’, he said, ‘is it yours?’ Somchai cocked his head and tightened his lips. The rim on his star-studded cap shaded his eyes, but I knew he was scrutinising my facial reactions. I ignored him and stared at the blanket; I hadn’t expected to see it again.

The captain dropped the blanket on the teak steps that led up to the lodge. He must have known I owned it. Otherwise, he wouldn’t have brought the highest-ranking cop in the province with him.

I hesitated and considered denying everything. Almost every household in the highlands owned identical blankets – they were as common as empty Singha beer bottles. The captain couldn’t prove this blood-caked one belonged to me. Unless I confessed.



Somchai was fishing, and he struck me as the type of angler who likes to watch a live worm squirm on a barbed hook. My stomach was churning. I couldn't swallow my spit. I knew I would never be able to bullshit my way out of this.

'Yeah, the blanket is mine. It's from down there.' I pointed to the nearest guest bungalow. A backpacker with long dishevelled hair, eyes shut, was meditating on the rickety veranda. The image of serenity in this atmosphere of intensifying panic struck me as incongruous. Somchai gave my guest, and his bungalow, a dismissive snort.

My head was spinning. Memories of a frantic moment in Bungalow 11 were surging back. I had ripped the blanket off the bed while I was bellowing in Thai, ordering my staff to bring me a hatchet.

Somchai reached again into his black bag. He slowly extracted a soiled tangle of green nylon cord. He held it out, as if trying to return it.

'How about this?' He was pushing the hook in deeper, but I wasn't going to squirm for him.

'It was the clothes line.' I lifted my head and puckered my lips in the direction of two wooden stakes stuck in the lawn. A short length of severed green cord dangled from the top of each post.

'We found these things in the forest near the cave.' His voice had lost its derision, and he no longer smiled. I struggled to meet his accusative stare and look less guilty than he was making me feel. I stuck with the incriminating truth.

'I ditched them there last month.' The captain looked at his superior and raised his eyebrows. The commander had crossed his arms on his decorated chest, and slowly nodded his head. I detected a glint of smug satisfaction in his eyes. He seemed confident he had solved the murder mystery.

Things were looking bad. The last time the commander had visited the lodge, he told me he intended to close the guesthouse. The autopsy had revealed the body of the murdered Australian contained a potentially lethal amount of heroin, and he insinuated that I had supplied the drugs. I told him I had never touched heroin in my life, and abhorred its use. The commander had curled his upper lip and given me a sceptical look, but he had allowed the



lodge to remain open.

Now he was back, fingering me for murder. If I couldn't refute the latest accusation, he might wrap up the case and contemplate an on-the-spot sentence. I lived in the Golden Triangle borderlands, where precedents were plentiful and death comes cheap. Bullets cost seven baht each – three for a dollar.

Over the past few minutes the police investigation had progressed at an alarming rate. The cops were deadly serious about the bloody blanket. I sucked in a lungful of cold mountain air to regain my composure. I knew the captain or his superior had lost the plot, and I was slipping into a quagmire of dodgy judgment. I needed to distance myself from their dubious accusation and from my ludicrous thoughts. The evidence that linked me to the brutal slaying of the Australian was flimsy, even farcical, and nobody was going to shoot me in front of my guests. Anyway, the case was already bizarre enough, without any embellishment.

People staying at the lodge had seen Ewa Czajor alive for the last time on 3 January 1988, at the mouth of Lod Cave. Ewa had left the cave alone at sunset, while her boyfriend Peter lingered inside the 50-metre-high entrance chamber with a group of foreign tourists. In the twilight, hundreds of thousands of cave-adapted swifts fly into the cave to spend the night clinging to stalactites, while the resident bats exit for nocturnal hunting. Peter had waited for the evening bird and bat show to begin.

Ewa's assailants had intercepted her somewhere along the path from the cave to the lodge. They had injected heroin into her arm, raped her, and strangled her with a jungle vine.

Weeks had passed without any arrests, and pressure was building on the police to come up with a credible suspect. Then they had picked up the blanket and green cord. I admitted to ownership and to having trashed the stuff outside Lod Cave, but did not confess to any crime – let alone murder.

I was aware that a tourist's blood had drenched the blanket – it had splattered onto the cave floor, coated my hands and smeared my clothing. My heart was racing when I chucked the blanket behind a tree near the cave entrance. I had little choice; soggy cloth doesn't burn, and I didn't have time to bury it.



Now, with Somchai standing on the front steps of the lodge, accusing me of complicity in the murder of one of my guests, I wished I had stashed the blanket in my Land Rover, washed it and put it back in Bungalow 11.

What baffled me was that the captain knew he couldn't rationally relate my blanket to the murder of Ewa. Her killers had drugged and then throttled her, but had not spilt any blood. Somchai's soiled evidence led nowhere.

I invited the officers into the lodge to discuss the matter over a mug of coffee and banana muffins. I felt confident I could clarify some of the confusion clouding the case, and contribute original insights. The captain needed to revitalise his stagnant investigation with a more logical interpretation of the evidence.

I thought I knew the identity of one of the killers. I had requested protection weeks before Somchai's latest visit, and was still paying for two uniformed officers with M16s to sleep in a hut near the front gate of the lodge. I hoped their presence would deter my suspect from pumping shells out of his five-cartridge, pump-action shotgun into my guesthouse and family. Thai authorities had handed out 15 of these weapons to men in our border-region village, for self-defence.

To counteract the intimidation, my male staff had acquired illegal weaponry from Chiang Mai. Backyard factories in Lampang churned out the crude but effective handguns. Some fired shotgun shells that sprayed a lethal volley of pellets. Others blasted out M16 bullets and recoiled with enough force to snap a wrist.

I had never fired a gun, but kept my shotgun loaded on the wall beside my bed. My family slept restlessly. We cringed at creaking floorboards, the growls of the village dogs, and every gunshot. A vision of a last-stand scenario was exacerbating my insomnia. My opponent could pump out five shells in rapid succession. A pre-emptive strike might be a survivable option, but I doubted I could muster enough courage, or hate, to fire my single-shell shotgun first.

I sat with the two officers on the bamboo floor of the lodge, and we discussed my perceptions and fears. I assumed that they didn't touch the muffins because they had handled the blanket. Over coffee, the captain said he was conducting a broad investigation



and considered everyone a possible suspect. And I would remain one until I established my innocence.

‘You know Diew and I were in Chiang Mai when Ewa died’, I told my accusers. Diew is a Chiang Mai native, and she had worked in the northern capital as a trekking guide. When Ewa was leaving the cave alone to walk back to the lodge, we were 200 kilometres away – a distance that took five or six hours in our Land Rover.

Another Australian tourist could confirm our sound alibi, if he was taking his medication. Our witness, a proverbial guest from hell, had accompanied us from the lodge to Chiang Mai. He had needed to consult a psychiatrist and treat his schizophrenia, which had flared out of control.

I convinced the officers that my blanket had nothing to do with the bloodless death of Ewa, and that I was nowhere near the cave when she died. But while I hadn’t committed murder, I still needed to clarify why I had dumped a bloody blanket from Bungalow 11 and a nylon cord from the lodge in the forest near the scene of the crime. The explanation I gave the police was succinct. The full version of how I ended up on the Thai–Burma border with an Australian tourist’s blood on my hands is long and convoluted, and it begins more than a decade earlier on another continent.



# BEACHED

I have always liked rocks. My fascination with them as a child turned me into an avid collector of minerals, ores, crystals and semi-precious stones. At night, after school, my father accompanied me to adult education courses in geology and palaeontology. When I finished school, I studied geology at Sydney University for a brief period. I could have completed my science degree and worked as a geologist, but I grew up with a radical generation. Rock was our music and stones were mind-altering experiences. My tolerant, left-leaning parents further influenced my adolescent drift towards alternative lifestyles.

I was 17 when I left university in 1973. I planned to join the Tuntable Falls commune near Nimbin in northern New South Wales with some people I had met at the Nimbin Aquarius festival earlier that year. They invited me to Melbourne, where I shared their two-bedroom terrace house in North Fitzroy with 13 other tenants and sought menial work to earn \$200 for a share in the commune.

When I revisited the rainbow-hued town of Nimbin, I paid for my share in Tuntable but didn't settle in. A good number of the shareholders either had their heads in clouds of dope smoke or floated in a hallucinogenic space I couldn't relate to. Few looked capable of working the land and supporting themselves. I felt too young and independent to convert into an entrenched hippie on their commune.

As a teenage dropout, I did mindless processing work in factories and dug sewerage trenches. In rural New South Wales I worked as a noxious plant controller and sprayed blackberry, briar and thistle with 2,4,5-T. I clung to the bonnet of a Land Cruiser and fired at the weeds with a high-powered spray gun, while my co-worker gunned the truck across paddocks and gullies. By the end of each day the sticky herbicide had soaked my overalls and



matted my long hair. Years later, I read that this defoliant was one of the major ingredients of Agent Orange, the toxic chemical mix American planes had showered for 10 years over vast tracts of forested highlands in Vietnam.

My co-worker had been spraying without a mask for 14 years, and I think the chemicals had affected his brain. One time when he came across a single opium poppy, he attacked the delicate white flower with an intensity that bordered on insanity. Every time he saw a snake he slammed on the brakes, jumped out, and clobbered the cowering reptile with a hoe. If it escaped down a hole, he would pour in viscous chemical concentrate, which we normally diluted with 1,000 litres of water.

I risked two months of extreme exposure and then quit. I returned to Sydney and found a job on an oyster farm in Botany Bay, not far from the spot where Captain Cook's landing party had come face to face with Aborigines for the first time. They had fired their muskets at the astonished locals and wounded an old man. Over the next two centuries, the white invaders had steadily trashed the pristine environment of Botany Bay. I doubted the shellfish we harvested upstream from the oil refinery and across the bay from the airport were safe to eat.

After eight months of living with sliced hands and smelling of oyster slime, I left Australia to hitchhike around New Zealand. On the South Island I tramped in the Alps and worked as a kitchen hand in Queenstown. On Stewart Island I walked alone around the desolate coastline and lived on fish and abalone. I didn't meet anyone for a week, the longest time I have ever spent alone. In New Zealand I stayed in youth hostels, where international travellers related inspirational accounts of the overland route between Australia and Europe.

I returned home and laboured on the Queensland railways. My mates and I worked in sweltering tropical heat, repairing archaic tracks with nineteenth-century tools. Our gang drilled hardwood sleepers with hand augers, cut through steel rails with hacksaws and heaved 3,000-pound lengths up treacherous gravel embankments with hand-held pincers. I camped near the line to avoid paying rent and to maximise the returns from the back-wrenching lowly paid work. I daydreamed of an idyllic Asia to see me through each punishing day.



I scrounged money for a year, bought a copy of Tony and Maureen Wheeler's Across Asia on the cheap, and flew to Bali. The island enchanted me more than I had imagined it could, and I endeavoured to stretch my earnings as far as possible. Nothing inspired me to rush back to the drudgery of unskilled manual labour. I didn't leave Asia for the next 10 years.

I entered Thailand in March 1977 with Cranston, an Australian friend who had joined me in Indonesia. We crossed the border from Malaysia and headed straight for Phuket, a languid tropical island the travellers grapevine had recommended we visit.

Southern Thailand looked like a war zone, with soldiers everywhere. Machine guns poked out of walls of sandbags encircling police stations. At fortified highway checkpoints, armed officials boarded buses and searched male passengers.

In spite of the security concerns, the change of cultural scenery was refreshing. Thai people didn't hassle foreigners or invade personal space. An ambience of tolerance, an abundance of good cheap food, spectacular limestone landscapes, and the easygoing locals impressed me. I liked what I saw, tasted and felt.

We reached Phuket town in the late afternoon and caught a ride on a truck to the coast. Our informants had raved about the beauty of Nai Harn, and they were right. A natural lagoon and low sand hills backed a broad swathe of beach sand. Forested hills enclosed the northern and southern ends of the bay. We arrived in time to see the sun sink into the Andaman Sea.

Jon, an ex Thai cop, owned the only structure on the sand hills. His sand-floored, grass-roofed restaurant catered to travellers' needs and fantasies. His guests left their packs in a room near the kitchen, slept on the beach, and buried their passports and valuables in holes in the sand under where they slept.

Jon's menu offered a wide selection of Thai and western food. He also provided cheap, potent ganja, which he sold by the stick. The growers of northeast Thailand bound the sticky buds onto toothpick-thin lengths of bamboo, then compressed bundles of 20 sticks into bricks for easy distribution within Thailand, and shipment overseas. Jon's stoned guests developed insatiable appetites, and devoured his food. Everything went on the bill: 'two banana fritters,



three sticks, one shrimp fried rice'. Guests smoked Jon's weed in the restaurant bong and coasted for weeks in a hazy cycle of smoking, swimming, eating and snoozing.

On my first night at Jon's I was sharing a bottle of Singha after dinner with Cranston, when an attractive waitress leaned over our table.

'My name Ot', she said in quaintly accented English. 'It mean Tadpole. You handsome man. Tonight you sleep me.' I almost choked on my beer. Wow, at Jon's place you could get stoned then laid. I had spent the last six months in Islamic countries where, if you were caught, it was the other way around. My last sexual encounter was with my New Zealand girlfriend in Australia, and she hadn't written to me for three months.

'Later, you come my hut.' Tadpole pointed to a tiny structure on the sand near the restaurant.

I accepted the erotic order. She invited me into her lust shack again the next night. On the third evening she desired both Cranston and me. We demurred, and she moved to another table and offered herself to two French travellers, which we thought was funny, considering her name. Over the next week, she slept with half of the restaurant's male guests, and I felt much less handsome. Years later, I heard she had married one of her conquests. I didn't meet a Thai woman like Ot again.

On most days, Cranston and I escaped the lethargic stoned scene at Jon's joint. We walked on small paths over the northern hills to untainted strips of sand that separated lush jungle and coconut palms from the warm aquamarine Andaman. We returned to Nai Harn every sunset and joined other young travellers from all over the planet, and off it, in a ritual at the southern end of the beach. Sitting on rounded granite boulders, we gazed out to sea as the orange base of the sun merged with its reflection on the water.

Travellers told us they had heard of another island on the east coast that foreigners seldom visited. The journey from the mainland took all night, they said, and one ferry plied the route. We headed east with three people we had met at Jon's.

No guesthouse or bungalow operations had encroached on Haat Chaweng, the longest beach on Koh Samui. We rented a room for 15 baht a night in a family house at the end of the beach. Three of us slept in the room, and the others crashed on the warm sand.



The only other people on the beach were locals with throw nets. Coconut plantations brought in baht and seafood supplemented the rice the islanders grew in their paddies. The largest settlement, a small market village at the pier, reeked of dried squid and coconut oil. Less than a dozen vehicles plied the rutted roads between outlying villages.

I figured that three months on Haat Chaweng would cost me less than \$100, the equivalent of what I earned in a week, with overtime, on the Queensland railways. The days started to merge into each other. Beach life on a laid-back island couldn't get much cheaper, or better. The temptation to slip into a tropical rut and drift like flotsam in the Gulf of Siam threatened to jeopardise my travel plans.

I escaped while I could and headed north to Bangkok and then Chiang Mai, where I planned to trek on my own in the mountains and stay in tribal villages. In less than a month I would be on a plane to India, heading for Europe.



# SEDUCED

When I started travelling in Asia I had no intention of falling in love in a foreign country and never returning to live in Australia. But the allure of a Thai girl and her seductive lifestyle caused me to stumble early in my overland trip. An intoxicating cocktail of exotic cultures and mountain trekking proved irresistible. I didn't realise drugs, disease and death would contaminate the mix and affect so many people.

I met Diew, Chiang Mai's first female trekking guide, in May 1977, a few days after my 22nd birthday. She worked in a small tour office near the moat that surrounds the remnants of the ancient city walls. I rented a bicycle from her and pedalled to a distant waterfall. When I returned the bike, she invited me to see a movie. We watched King Kong, with Jessica Lange in the leading role. The name of the actress in the ape's hand became familiar, years later, after her ex-husband and I became good friends, and I spent more than \$2,000 of her money on a vehicle that almost killed me.

Diew worked for Maurice, a French expatriate who had lived in the northern capital for 20 years. Maurice had established one of the first trekking tour companies in Chiang Mai. His guides led foreign tourists into the mountains, where they stayed overnight in small villages.

I had walked a lot in the bush in Australia and thought I could follow the paths between villages without a guide. All I needed was a starting point and a basic map showing a few village names. Other travellers had told me the hill people welcomed foreigners who wandered into their villages.

My Thai language skills were limited to a few simple words, and I knew little about the country and culture. During five months in Indonesia and one in Malaysia I had picked up



basic Bahasa, but I couldn't learn the language of every country on the way to Europe. Thai script looked daunting and the tones sounded impossible to pronounce. Diew told me the Thai words for near (gly) and far (gly), and I couldn't tell them apart. Maybe trekking alone would be harder than I had expected.

Diew kept no maps to hand out but agreed to join me on an independent trek. Little did I know I had started to veer off onto an erratic and unpredictable path in life, not on any map.

Diew, two months younger than me, had finished high school and a tourist guide course at Chiang Mai University. Her smile radiated a mellow innocence that she balanced with a trace of cheeky humour. I admired her honesty, inquisitive character and her good looks. I thought she liked me.

We caught a bus north to Chiang Rai Province and then continued by truck and on foot to Ban Saen Chai, an Akha village. From there we hiked for five days on mountain trails towards Mae Sai, a small town on the border with Burma. We spent each night in an Akha or Chinese Kuomintang village.

Diew told me that 10 ethnic minorities, called hill tribes, populated the highlands of northern Thailand. Distinct customs, clothing and languages distinguished each group. Over the past few centuries these shifting agriculturalists had migrated from China and neighbouring Burma and Laos in search of fertile land for their fields and a less dangerous place to live.

The hill tribes' self-sufficient way of life necessitated a relentless exploitation of and dependence on dwindling forest resources. Escalating populations compounded the environmental pressures and compelled the hill tribes to establish new villages. Decades of haphazard movements resulted in people with diverse origins living in close proximity.

The hill tribes attained notoriety because of their practice of cultivating opium poppy. Arab traders, as early as the seventh century, had introduced opium from its native home in the Mediterranean to the Far East, where the Chinese used it almost exclusively as a medicine. The situation changed when British merchants in the late eighteenth century started trading opium from their Indian colonies for Chinese silks, ceramics and teas. Despite resistance



from Chinese authorities that culminated in the Opium War of 1839–42, British policies created a society teeming with addicts, from the poorest peasants to the wealthiest aristocrats. To reduce the economic drain, in the late nineteenth century the Chinese government encouraged farmers in southwest China to cultivate poppy in commercial quantities. By the early twentieth century China was harvesting a colossal 22,000 tonnes of opium a year.

Highland farmers across the border in northern Burma and Laos became dependent on the new cash crop. They cleared patches of forest over a vast area of undeveloped mountains and sowed the seeds for the emergence of the Golden Triangle.

Following the Chinese revolution, Mao's victorious troops forced the Nationalist Kuomintang (KMT) from their last bases in Yunnan, a province in southwest China. Firmly in control, the communists managed to eradicate poppy cultivation in China within a few years, creating a huge vacuum in the world supply.

Remnants of several KMT army divisions re-established their headquarters in the highlands of the Shan State in neighbouring northeast Burma. This state is the biggest in Burma and homeland of the Shan, who share linguistic and cultural ties with the Northern Thais. To help finance their army and fund CIA-supported invasions of Yunnan to 'liberate' China from the communists, the KMT organised and dominated the drug trade in the Golden Triangle. The KMT and Yunnanese merchants encouraged poppy cultivation, purchased the opium in highland villages, and used mule caravans to transport bulk shipments from collection points to heroin refineries. These makeshift laboratories cooked countless tonnes of raw opium and transformed it into morphine, at a ratio of ten to one. Chemists at the refineries mixed in more chemicals and produced a similar weight of high-grade heroin. KMT soldiers guarded the refineries, escorted the drug caravans, and transported the finished products across the Thai border.

The Burmese army could not deal with this serious threat to the country's sovereignty, and the Prime Minister requested United Nations intervention. It wasn't until 1961 that Burmese troops, with the help of 20,000 Peoples Liberation Army soldiers, finally drove the major KMT bases out of Burma. The KMT moved into the mountains along the border with



northern Thailand where the Thai army, fearing the spread of communist ideology, tolerated their presence as a buffer. The KMT continued to control the drug trade inside the Shan State from their Thai bases, and their wealth and influence blossomed.

By the 1970s the Golden Triangle had emerged as the world's biggest producer of potent Number 4 heroin. This export-grade heroin is a white, water-soluble powder that is easy to smoke, snort and inject. Drug barons constructed their clandestine laboratories in volatile border regions where affiliated armies, such as the KMT, enforced the lawlessness.

Chiang Mai developed into an important transit hub for Golden Triangle exports. The city further acquired a reputation as a destination for foreigners who wanted to access poppy-growing regions and sample opiates.

I had no desire to smoke opium, but the hill people fascinated me. It seemed as if they had perfected a lifestyle similar to what I had hoped to find when I left Sydney University for Tuntabue Falls. I also loved walking in the bush.

On my first trek with Diew we hiked on a bewildering maze of small paths that crisscrossed the hills, linking settlements and fields. We followed verbal directions with vague allusions to repetitive geographical features like 'the big tree' or 'a small stream'. Somehow, we reached a village each day.

On the second day of our trek, while we rested in a village, a caravan of heavily laden mules plodded past. More than 20 soldiers, armed with assault rifles and grenade launchers, escorted the animals. I had never seen such daunting firepower. The soldiers eyed us – unwelcome witnesses to a crime – with suspicion. If we had run into the drug smugglers on an isolated mountain trail, they may have been less friendly.

The following day we met a long column of Akha families on a narrow path, far from a village. Diew said they were moving from Burma into Thailand. People strained under the weight of full baskets on their backs, with wooden shoulder yokes and woven bamboo head straps bearing the load. They stacked the rest of their belongings high above their heads. Babies and infants poked their heads from lengths of indigo-dyed cloth that their parents and sisters had slung around their shoulders. Men led pigs on leashes, and piglets scurried behind



their mothers.

Old silver coins, baubles, glass beads, monkey fur, bamboo and coloured chicken feathers adorned the women's head-dresses. Dangling silver ornaments jingled and jangled and sparkled in the sunlight as they walked. Some women joined their short jackets with an engraved silver disk, while others wore appliquéd halter-like undergarments. A sash with embroidered ends swung in front of their low-slung cotton skirts, and colourful leggings protected their shins. The costumes epitomised the exotic tribal look that was luring curious foreigners into the hills.

Akha women displayed an abundance of inherited silver jewellery, but owned few other possessions. Most of the women walked barefoot. The Akha received little income from opium sales, and villagers in Burma struggled to scrape by. Marauding Burmese soldiers, along with a menagerie of merciless militias, demanded allegiance from the hill people and constantly helped themselves to a share of the villagers' subsistence-level wealth. Since the Second World War, tens of thousands of desperate hill people have fled to the mountains of northern Thailand.

Diew and I finished our maiden trek in a tiny hut on the banks of the Mekong River where Burma, Thailand and Laos meet. This point is the symbolic heart of Sam Liam Tong Kum, the Thai name for the Golden Triangle. A lone Thai border patrol police officer was staying in the hut, and boredom had driven him to chain-smoke pipes of ganja. As he chopped the ganja on a board and packed it into his bamboo bong, he talked until well after midnight of drugs and war.

He pointed to village lights on the Lao side, near a curve in the Mekong River. He said one of the biggest battles ever fought in the Golden Triangle took place in Ban Kwan village. In 1967 Khun Sa, a powerful half-Shan half-Chinese drug merchant, had organised a caravan of 300 horses and mules to transport 16 tonnes of opium. Five hundred armed guards escorted the shipment from northern Burma to a heroin refinery hidden in a sawmill shed in Ban Kwan. Khun Sa planned to invest the profits earned from selling the opium in weapons. If he could arm another 1,000 troops for his Shan United Army, he could wrest control of the drug



trade from the KMT.

In his book *The Politics of heroin*, Alfred McCoy states that General Rattikone, commander-in-chief of the Royal Lao Army, operated the Ban Kwan refinery and five others along the Mekong. Much of his Number 4 heroin ended up in the veins of American GIs seeking a chemical escape from the horrors of the war in Vietnam.

One thousand KMT soldiers attacked Khun Sa's caravan and later besieged the Shan in the sawmill buildings. General Rattikone ordered both armies to leave the country, but the Shan refused to budge and the KMT demanded a payment of \$250,000. A few days later, six Royal Lao Air Force planes bombed both sides indiscriminately for two days. The Shan escaped by boat to Burma, leaving 82 dead and most of their opium. The Lao troops then surrounded the fleeing KMT. The defeated Chinese soldiers paid a steep fine, and General Rattikone allowed them to cross the Mekong to Thailand. They boarded chartered buses near the border patrol police hut and travelled, with their weapons, back to their main base at Mae Salong in the mountains north of Chiang Rai. The commander shared the opium with his crack Second Paratroop Division. Khun Sa, who had directed his troops from a safe distance inside Burma, never ceased in his efforts to dominate the opium trade.

Diew and I left the border hut in the morning and returned to Chiang Mai. The trip stood out as a highlight of my travels in Asia. I suggested to Diew she should branch out, set up her own business and lead treks on trails that no other tours walked. 'D Tours' would be a good name.

All the commercial trekking from Chiang Mai at that time concentrated in a cluster of villages north of the Nam Kok in Chiang Rai Province. Diew said that foreigners in the small villages sometimes outnumbered the locals. In Akha villages children demanded coins and sweets, while their trinket-selling mothers mobbed visitors. Entrepreneurs in Lisu villages operated lodges to accommodate the tour groups and arranged 'hill tribe dance shows'.

Nobody regulated the fierce competition between businesses that organised tribal trekking tours. Moo Tours paid commissions to tour agencies and guesthouses and dominated the market. Jealousy and greed sparked its rivals into action. Bandits targeted tourists who



trekked with the popular company and within a month, after 14 robberies, Moo Tours lost its customers. I feared a similar fate, or worse, awaited Diew if she went into direct competition with the established operators.

A week after my first trek, I helped Diew convince six travellers we met in Daret's restaurant in Chiang Mai to join her on a five-day trip. We set off in the well-worn trekking area near Thaton but planned to reach deeper into the hills. On the second day we passed a KMT village where the Thai border patrol police operated a checkpoint. They required passing tourists to register their names and trekking company. Nobody staffed the post that day, so we wrote our details in an open book. Diew's operation had no name but one of the trekkers came up with 'Footprint Tours'. 'We take lots of photos and leave nothing but our footprints', he said. I liked it and told him to write it down.

We spent nights in Akha and Lisu villages, strayed into poppy fields in Burma and stayed in a hotel in Mae Salong, where the KMT had their headquarters. The tourists told us the tour had far surpassed their expectations.

When we arrived back in Chiang Mai, our post-trek glow rapidly cooled. The manager of the guesthouse where we stayed told us a group of incensed border patrol police had shown up while we were away. They had searched for us and threatened to beat us to a pulp if we ever trekked in the Thaton area again.

We found out that one of our trekkers had drawn an outline of a foot around the new name for Diew's tour in the official police register. A deliberate display of the bottom of a foot constitutes a major insult in Thailand, and the police took it personally. The threat of violence helped me realise that this was a good time to leave if I wanted to continue travelling to Europe, but I also knew that when I follow my heart rather than my head, all plans slip into the background.



# LIZARDS AND SHARKS

**D**iew and Thailand enticed me to stay longer than I had intended. We avoided police checkpoints and found a new trekking route, and three months whizzed by. I postponed my flight to India and headed south on the first of many trips to Malaysia for a new Thai visa.

On a street in Penang, my favourite Malaysian city, I ran into Jim, an Australian I had met in Phuket. We had travelled together to Koh Samui and then onto Chiang Mai, where we had rented bicycles from Diew. Since then we had gone our separate ways. He coaxed me into a quiet noodle shop and filled me in on the details of a wacky predicament he faced.

‘I’m in trouble’, he said. His eyes couldn’t keep still, and his furtive glances out to the street unnerved me. ‘I bought a couple of bricks of sticks at the back of the Atlanta Hotel in Bangkok, ground them up and packed them into a baby powder bottle. I wanted to sell it to other travellers but this Malay guy on Chulia Street asked me if I needed to score. I thought it might be a good chance to unload it so I asked him if he wanted some. He seemed cool, so I took him to my room in the Tye Ann and showed him my stash. He reckoned it was too expensive. Anyway, earlier that morning I’d told the manager I wanted to change to a front room with windows and, just after the dealer left, I moved upstairs. So, I’m in my new room, smoking a joint, and someone starts banging on the door, real loud. I almost shit myself. I told them to wait a sec, lit some incense, and shoved the dope under the mattress. It wasn’t the cops; it was this German with long hair, all freaked out, and he’s saying, “Are you Jim. The police are searching my room for drugs and they think I’m Jim from Australia.” He said he showed them his German passport and they let him go. I asked him if they had gone and he said they were still in the hotel. I chucked the dope in my shoulder bag, walked down the



stairs, straight past about a dozen cops talking to the manager, and jumped on a bus to Batu Ferringhi.'

'What did you do with the weed?' I was getting anxious – maybe he still had it on him.

'I buried it in the sand at the beach, then went back to the hotel to get my stuff. The manager, this old Chinese bloke, said he'd told the cops I had already checked out and left Penang. Nice uh?'

'So what's the problem?'

'They know my name, they know I'm Australian and I've still got to catch the ferry off the island.'

'But you buried the dope.'

'Yeah, that's the problem. It's good stuff. I don't want to sell it, but it'd be a bloody shame just to leave it.'

'Forget about it, it's not worth it.'

'I don't want to smoke it here, but there must be some place where there's nobody, and we could blow it there.' Without warning, he had drawn me into his predicament. The odd puff while watching the sinking sun at Nai Harn was the extent of our previous mutual indulgence.

Jim pulled a map of Malaysia out of his pack. He started pointing to islands off the east coast and talking about the two of us spending a weed-wasted week in paradise. When I was working on the railways I had dreamed of living on a tropical island in Asia and subsisting on a staple of coconuts and fish, but there was no way I was catching a ferry and crossing the country with a man the police were seeking for importing and dealing drugs. In Malaysia, mere possession of 250 grams of cannabis earns you a mandatory death sentence. My friend probably had enough for a couple of lifetimes in prison. This didn't seem to bother Jim; he had already hatched a plan and somehow, over a few bottles of Anchor beer, I approved of it and decided to fulfil my dream.

That evening, Jim left for Singapore to buy cheap electronic goods to resell in India. I agreed to meet him in four or five days time on Pulau Perhentian Besar, the remotest deserted island we could find on his map.



Before leaving Penang I purchased goggles, a snorkel and a hand spear. A thick rubber loop hung from the base of the basic weapon and a small barbed harpoon tipped the other end. To catch fish, the user stretches the rubber up the shaft and then releases it to propel the spear towards the target. I had never used any sort of underwater weapon but felt confident I could catch enough fish to feed myself.

I crossed Malaysia on buses, with my paranoia intensifying as the hours passed. The fat packet of compressed ganja bulged in my underwear, and I feared someone would notice my oversized balls or sense my guilt. I avoided eye contact and tried to act the innocent tourist I should have been.

I travelled all day and reached Kuala Besut on the east coast at night. At first light I boarded a small boat headed for a fishing village on Perhentian Kechil. From Perhentian Kechil (Small) another boat ferried me across a narrow strait and dropped me off at a national park jetty on Perhentian Besar (Big), my island.

I stepped off the rickety boat landing onto a deserted beach and watched the fishing boat head back to Kechil. I walked up to the park office and met no one. Tall weeds sprouted between the buildings. I peered through a grimy window into an empty room. Near the main structure, a couple of derelict shacks and a row of coconut palms surrounded a well. I lowered a bucket on a rope and drew some fresh water. At least I wouldn't die from dehydration. I walked back to the coast and headed west along a dazzling white strip of coral-powder sand.

Many footprints patterned the sand, but they weren't human. Huge monitor lizards, bigger than goannas, stalked the beach. When I approached them, they stared at me, flicked their tongues, then scurried into an impregnable tangle of emerald-hued jungle.

I had heard that gigantic lizards in Indonesia fought over live prey and could strip the flesh off large mammals in minutes. The dragons grew much larger on Komodo, but I guessed dozens, maybe hundreds, of big monitors lived on Perhentian Besar, and it looked like no other big mammal meal shared their small island. I felt like a swimmer in a crocodile-infested river – a welcome intruder. I didn't know whether they would attack humans, or what had happened to the national park employees.



I walked past a headland to a curved bay and chose a good campsite under a shady tree. Turquoise-coloured patches of sand and clumps of coral bottomed the shallow water of the cove. One hundred metres offshore the ocean floor plummeted, and the water turned a deep sapphire blue.

Despite my nagging unease with the island's four-legged inhabitants, I loved the isolation, cut off from human intrusion. I lay back on the soft sand, on a perfect beach, stranded in tropical paradise.

I had brought a pot, rice and vegetables from the mainland, but I needed fish and coconuts to last more than a few days. As a child in Australia, I had used a snorkel and goggles in a sandy-bottomed lake. I looked forward to the new challenge of diving in the open ocean and spearing fish.

I smoked a spliff and waded into the warm, clear water. When it reached waist deep, I swam across the coral-encrusted bay. At the edge of the shelf, I stared with trepidation into the cold, lapis-blue void. I felt like a trespasser, floating above the seemingly bottomless depths of an alien world.

The outstanding clarity of the water and the Thai weed magnified everything I saw through my goggles. The proliferation of marine life on the edge of the shelf astounded me and accentuated my insignificance in the vastness of the ocean. I drifted, breathless with fright, above a two-metre-long stingray. I saw a grouper, with a head bigger than mine, protrude from under the coral. Moray eels and schools of huge tropical fish bared razor teeth in dog-sized jaws.

The steep drop into unfathomable blue intrigued but cowed me, and I avoided more than a quick glance. I was swimming alone, way out of my depth. If anything happened, no one would stand witness and no one could help. I dared not spear any large fish; if I wounded one it might attack, and the rest of the school would smell my blood and rip me to shreds.

I spotted smaller fish that looked less threatening, lurking in the coral. When the spear missed, the targeted fish spun on its tail and returned to its original position. This plucky behaviour guaranteed that if I stretched my rubber enough times I would spear more fish than



I could eat. I concentrated on individual fish, and fired until I scored a direct hit.

Within minutes I speared four fish – enough for dinner. But I hadn't thought about what I'd do after I speared something, and carried no bag for my catch. I stuffed the wounded fish between the elastic waistband of my shorts and my belly. I could feel them twitch, and I watched as blood oozed out of the spear holes and diffused through my underwear.

I still cannot fathom why I suddenly snapped out of my fishing frenzy. Maybe I had a premonition. As an Australian, I should have thought of it earlier.

I twirled, treading water, to face the deep and confront my fears. A reef shark, bigger than me, was heading straight towards me at high speed! In an instant, the hunter had turned prey. A mental picture of my imminent disembowelment flashed through my mind, and I lost it. Limbs flaying, I screamed underwater in a burst of bubbles. I startled the shark, and it spun on its tail and faded into the deep blue.

I had heard sharks circle before they come in for the kill. It could bear down on me from anywhere. I was quivering more than my catch when I pulled the fish out of my pants.

I should have dumped my dinner and bloody shorts and swum like Tarzan back to the beach, but fish were hard to catch, and I doubted I would risk spearing any more. I skewered the fish on the end of the spear and pulled the rubber loop tight enough to dislocate a thumb. I swam with my right arm and twisted my back so that I could look over my left shoulder. I hoped that if the shark attacked it would go for the fish, rather than my groin. When it opened its mouth wide, I intended to release the spear down its gullet and swim for my life.

My heart thumped in my heaving chest. Don't panic, I told myself, sharks sense fear. I thrashed like a one-finned fish in the neck-deep water of the bay. The 100-metre swim lasted for an eternity, but I made it to the beach, unbitten but bowed.

I stayed on the beach, trapped between my phobia of the flesh-eating lizards that lurked in the jungle and the man-eating sharks in the ocean. I grilled the fish for dinner; they were bony and had squishy flesh, but they flavoured my rice. After sunset I smoked a big joint of Jim's stash to take my mind off the wildlife and help me sleep. I stoked a huge bonfire, but the crackling palm fronds and flickering shadows in the jungle kept me awake. I laid the spear

next to me, just in case I had to use it on dry land. I started thinking that roast reptile, done on a bed of coals the way Australian Aborigines cook goanna, would probably taste better than the fish I had speared.

An Indonesian had told me that Komodo dragons don't have to rip their victims apart to slay them. If a dragon pierces your skin with its teeth, its toxic saliva could kill you within hours. That night, long after my fire had died, I dreamt a band of Perhentian monitors were slobbering over my face, drooling spittle into my mouth. As the sun rose, I resolved to stop smoking, forget about sharks and lizards, and collect coconuts.

I had underestimated the difficulty and dangers in obtaining a coconut. I could throw rocks or chunks of dry coral all day and still fail to dislodge one. Climbing a palm tree involved a risky descent that could strip the flesh off my hands and chest faster than a band of hungry monitors. I searched in vain for a bamboo pole to pry the stubborn nuts from their palms. Hungry and frustrated, I gave up.

When Jim arrived a few days later I gave him my spear and the rest of his weed, then left the island and headed for the hills. I never heard from Jim again.

Long after my failed attempt at subsistence living, I read that 10 times more people die in Asia every year from falling coconuts than from shark attacks.



# TRIBES AND TRIBULATIONS

**B**ack in the northern hills, I didn't have to look over my shoulder. The tribal people had blasted away the threat of pouncing tigers, and lizard meat was a delicacy. I loved trekking with Diew, and days in the hills rolled into months, then years.

We rotated between the highlands and a tiny room in the Riverside Guesthouse by the Mae Nam Ping in Chiang Mai. We soon realised that our city residence operated as a front for a heroin dealership. A group of Thai-born Chinese descendants of Kuomintang officers ran the place. The sleazy management supplied a constant stream of foreign addicts, invariably white males, who were eager to shoot up and smuggle 'Thai white'. The typical guest packed three or four ounces of heroin into condoms, shoved it up his anus, sold part of it at home and injected the rest. When he had finished it, he came back for more.

The regular repeat guests spent their days in a smacked stupor slouched in lounge chairs, or semi-conscious in their rooms. Some didn't leave the guesthouse for weeks. When one hard case with a cadaverous complexion checked out, I snuck a look into his room to see what he had lived on. The room stunk, and dozens of opened cans of putrefying condensed milk littered the floor.

We pretended not to notice as the weirdness of the place escalated. The head dealer called himself Sam to protect his real identity. Sam interacted with his addicted clients for a few straight years before he started snorting and smoking his uncut Golden Triangle product with them. His tolerance soared, and within months he was ingesting a heaped teaspoon of powder each regular session – enough to kill an uninitiated user. Some nights, Sam slunk around the guesthouse garden, stark naked and very stoned. I saw him stash and retrieve big bags of powder while he chain-smoked smack-packed joints.

A girl overdosed in an upstairs room and the management convinced the police she had died from injuries sustained in a motorcycle accident. Wolfgang, the Spanish junkie who had administered her last needle, left the next day but returned a month later.

Wolfgang maintained a shocking habit. Open sores from cigarette burns pockmarked his chest. The fags had dropped from his lips while he slumped after a hit, but the pain and stench of sizzling flesh and fizzling chest hair failed to bring him to his senses. A crusted purple eruption of swollen and punctured veins disfigured the back of Wolfgang's hands. He said he had scored a bag of good cocaine in Europe but had run out of usable veins on his arms and feet.

Kiwi Max, another regular with a long criminal record, pestered me with unsolicited accounts of his screwed-up illegal exploits – like when he flew out of Bangkok to Switzerland on a stolen Swiss passport.

'The fuckun photo in the fuckun passport didn't look like me', he said. Mad Max had a penchant for foul language and a limited repertoire of adjectives. Thai officials at Don Muang Airport suspected the sweaty, pin-eyed, felonious-looking junkie was carrying, and they made him squat on a table while they inserted enemas.

'I squeezed me fuckun cheeks and didn't drop my stash', he said. I think he wanted me to congratulate him on his achievement. He breezed through Swiss immigration, but the police arrested him in Zurich for heroin use. The court placed him in a rehabilitation facility.

'Fuckun Swiss mate, they let you out to work for 'em. I walked away and went to the New Zealand Embassy, and told 'em I lost me fuckun passport. I couldn't fuckun believe it, they fuckun gave me one. It's the first real passport I've had for years.'

Max based himself in Chiang Mai for a long time. When I met him on the street, I would greet him with a surprised, 'Max, you're still at large!' The last time I saw him, a few months before he died, weeping sores pock-marked his gaunt face, and I assumed he had AIDS. I gave him money to buy medicine, but I'm sure he spent it on smack.

Living apart from the wretched scene wasn't easy. For one entire year, a big group of plainclothes police raided the guesthouse two or three times a day and extorted money from



junkies. The police escorted them to a bank where they cashed their travellers cheques and handed over cash. Sometimes Sam paid the on-the-spot fines for them. The police knew we avoided narcotics and left us alone, except for one time when they tried to recruit me to set up heroin deals with tourists for sting operations. I told them, truthfully, that guns scared me.

The racket ended when an English–Argentinean couple complained to the Crime Suppression Division Police in Bangkok. They accused the Chiang Mai officers of planting heroin in their room and demanding a bribe to avoid arrest. The couple couldn't recognise any suspects in a line up, but the Bangkok police ordered the extortionists to stop swindling tourists.

Sam propitiated the spirit shrine in the corner of the guesthouse yard every month. He believed open bottles of French wine, roast ducks and other luxuries he placed on the altar would help his business prosper and keep him safe from arrest.

Diew and I had no qualms devouring the food and wine after the spirits had sniffed it for a few hours. We often thought of moving elsewhere, but the guesthouse occupied an ideal position on the quiet bank of the Mae Nam Ping opposite the main day market. And we couldn't get a better deal than a dollar a day for our room and tour office, with free monthly feasts thrown in the package.

Diew's trekking tours developed a reputation for reaching the remotest areas, where life in the hills had changed little for centuries. After the Footprint Tours fiasco forced us off the tourist-trampled trails, we sought new routes in mountain ranges between Chiang Mai and Chiang Rai. Small groups of intrepid travellers sponsored us, and we rambled from village to village for up to two weeks, as far from roads as we could go. We didn't care if we lost our way or had to spend a night away from a village. Wrong paths usually ended up at shelters in field clearings, which often perched on mountain slopes with spectacular views.

We walked in, uninvited, to secluded villages, and although we arrived as complete strangers, the hill people always welcomed and accommodated us. We encountered incredulous villagers who had never seen Caucasians. Great grandmothers gazed into my eyes and stroked the hairs on my arms. Men passed around our boots and packs and examined

the materials and designs. We marvelled at their exotic appearance and the excellence of their textiles, jewellery and basket ware.

The hill people reacted to our intrusion with curiosity. 'What have you come to buy or sell?' they asked. Thai and Yunnanese traders reached far-flung villages and purchased raw opium, corn, sesame seeds and forest products for small amounts of money. They sold medicines, cloth and manufactured goods at above-market prices. In one extreme case of shameless exploitation, unscrupulous merchants bought large amounts of mountain corn with play money. The notes, from one-baht packets of biscuits, looked like 500-baht notes, except a picture of superman had replaced the image of the Thai King.

The concept of tourism baffled most hill people. Why would wealthy strangers, with nothing to trade, walk long distances to visit their poor, undeveloped villages? People asked me if our government paid us to take photographs. I told them our elders were incapable of making the long journey, and the photos we took enabled them to see the people and places we visited. I said we liked to meet people who lived in a traditional way and maintained the customs of their ancestors.

Large crowds gathered in the houses where we stayed and gawked at us, as if we were performers in a travelling freak show. Bald foreigners sporting beards attracted considerable curiosity. I wondered why the children kept their distance until a Lahu man told me they looked like people with inverted heads.

Highlanders, cut off from the developed world, stared with their mouths open in amazement while we did unusual things like brush our teeth. Detachable body parts freaked everyone. One crowd recoiled when a woman removed her contact lenses. Another trekker placed his set of false teeth, with pink plastic gums, into a glass of water. Our host looked horrified and wanted to know if it hurt.

Simple magic with ropes or disappearing coins generated laughter and initiated interaction with our hill tribe hosts, but party tricks incited the most raucous responses. I encouraged our trekkers and onlookers to kneel on the bamboo floor and stand a matchbox in front of them, the distance from their elbows to their fingertips. Then, with hands clasped behind their



backs, they tried to pick up the matchbox with their teeth. This sent them toppling into each other and the floor, where they collapsed in hysterics.

One of our trekkers could cross his legs and place his feet behind the back of his neck. We could then lay our contortionist on his back and spin him like a top, which everyone thought was hilarious. Another tourist, an Australian with an uncanny ability to bark like a dog, could set all the village dogs baying. Every time we left a village, people followed and implored her for an encore. Her reputation as a barking bitch spread in the district, and when we arrived in other villages people were waiting for her.

Maybe the highlanders developed a strange impression of their farang (Caucasian) visitors. Some people saw us as harmless clowns, with cameras, while others kept their distance, but after we had spent a night in a family home, most people understood that we posed no threat.

While warm generosity and genuine hospitality was the norm in the hills, we did encounter rare instances of animosity. On one trek, high along the Burmese border in Chiang Rai Province, we stayed in a distant Akha village called Ban Pasang. Westerners had not stayed in the village before, and we drew a curious crowd into the headman's house. After dinner they sang Akha songs with beautiful harmonies for us, and we reciprocated with international hits like Row your boat and Old MacDonald's farm. We learnt that Akha pigs don't 'oink', ducks don't 'quack', cows can't 'moo' and roosters never 'cock-a-doodle-do'. Hokey pokey got so many people involved that the house shook. The songs crossed the cultural divide, but the headman had plans for his visitors that would widen the gap.

In the morning, the headman declared he was conducting an annual house-spirit ceremony and asked us to pay for a large pig. We told him we couldn't afford such an expensive gift, but Diew gave him cash for our accommodation and rice. He didn't look happy.

We hiked two hours from the village and stopped to rest in a clearing near a stream. I saw men with weapons and dressed in army-style clothing approaching us along the path. I told Diew, and she hid our expenses money behind a tree while I stashed my camera and Walkman in the bushes. The men circled our group. The eldest and scariest looking man squatted on the path next to us and gripped an M1 carbine, with the barrel pointed skyward.

The others stood on higher ground and brandished long muzzle-loading rifles.

The man with the carbine spoke first, and his Northern Thai carried an Akha accent. 'We are soldiers from Khun Sa's army (the infamous Shan United Army). We have been lost in the forest for many days, with nothing to eat.' I offered a loaf of bread, but he refused it with a contemptuous gesture. 'We need money. Each person must give us 3,000 baht, or you can't leave.'

The trekkers looked frightened. I was too. The man with the carbine seemed mean enough to shoot us all. 'They want money', I said, 'and we should give them some. Pass me your wallets or purses with baht in them. Slowly.' Compliance was the safest option. I had heard that bandits near Thaton demanded money from a European tourist and he had refused to give them anything, so they shot him in the foot. He then handed over everything.

Diew gave the leader a change purse full of hundreds of baht in small notes, and I handed him the tourists' money. He thumped the butt of his carbine on the path and glared at me. 'I said 3,000 baht each. Give me cigarettes.' I pulled a smoke halfway out of a pack and offered it to him. For a brief moment, he forgot his role. He touched his right elbow with his left hand and lowered his head as he accepted the smoke. Two seconds later, he snatched the pack out of my hand. He then stood up, ripped open a backpack, emptied its contents onto the ground and unzipped a bag. I saw a toothbrush, soap, shampoo and scissors. He stomped on it and shouted at us. He squatted again with his carbine across his knees and repeated his threat.

Something didn't seem right. The bandits exuded inexperience and spoke with each other in Akha. The boys with muzzle-loaders looked nothing like rebels who guard shipments of heroin and fight the Burmese army. Besides, Shan soldiers never lose their way in the border forests for days.

The stand-off had degenerated into a dangerous stalemate; we carried insufficient cash to meet the demands of the bandits, and if they didn't get what they wanted anything could happen. I decided to negotiate.

I spoke in Northern Thai, a language I had picked up using the slow-infusion method. The locals call the northern dialect Kum Muang. I had learnt it rather than Central Thai because



Kum Muang speakers can communicate with the majority of the hill tribe men in the Golden Triangle.

‘We have come a long way to visit our Akha brothers and sisters. We appreciate the hospitality and kindness of Akha people. We brought money from the farang country, but it is in the bank in Chiang Mai. We have money for food and bus fares with us. I understand you are lost and hungry. We would really like to help, but we brought small amounts of cash.’ I thought I was doing well, but the sneer on the face of the leader told me otherwise. It was time to improvise.

‘Brothers, I must tell you to be careful. In the farang country we have a very big and powerful army, the Farang United Army, with many thousands of aeroplanes and bombs.’ I knew Akha were familiar with modern weapons. Hundreds had fled from armed conflicts in Burma. In the Golden Triangle children handled guns, and I was threatening a man with a carbine. They also knew about aeroplanes that drop bombs; village elders would have seen or heard about them during the Second World War, and I had noticed wooden models of them on village gates. The symbolic law kah (gate) across the main path into an Akha village marks the boundary between the spirit-infested forest and the human world. By the gate, the villagers place wood carvings of naked or copulating couples that also demark the edge of the spirit world. Spirit-deflecting bamboo stars and swords, along with rough carvings of automatic weapons and helicopters with dangling wooden bombs, adorn the gates and frighten malicious spirits that might try to enter the village.

‘Farang United Army aeroplanes drop bombs so big that just one can destroy a village bigger than Ban Pasang. Many planes can fly from farang country to here in a few hours. And we have helicopters with big guns...’ I continued to expand on the gruesome aftermath of an air strike with massacred women, children, pigs and buffaloes in a bomb-razed village. Everything would die. The boys with muzzle-loaders started to fidget, and they looked edgy.

I felt a bit cruel resorting to hollow threats against naive highlanders, but if nobody lost face – and above all else, that was important – then it could be a safe, easy way out for all of us. I hoped my threat wouldn’t incite them to shoot us and hide our bodies so we couldn’t contact

our army.

The leader stood up and, with encouragement from the others, he apologised. 'You can come to visit this area again and you will be safe.' I didn't want to push my luck and ask for our money back – Diew still had plenty in her other purse. The bandits merged back into the forest, and the mystified but relieved trekkers wanted to know what I had said to get rid of them.

We retrieved our expenses money and valuables and stepped up the pace to Ban Jalor, the next village. There the mild-natured Akha headman told us Ban Pasang had a bad reputation, and he avoided going there. We never reported the incident, or took up the bandit's offer to revisit Ban Pasang. Instead, we headed for a wilder part of northern Thailand.



# BORDERLINE TREKKING

**I**n late 1977 Diew and I guided the first of many long treks into Mae Hong Son Province, our favourite region in the hills. This mountainous province in the far northwestern corner of Thailand shares a long wilderness border with Burma. The majority of the people living in the province belong to Shan, Karen, Lahu, Lisu, Hmong and Lua ethnic minorities.

One small truck left the Shan temple of Wat Pa Pao in Chiang Mai every morning in the dry season for the eight-hour journey on a winding dirt road to Pai. In the wet season the road turned into an impassable quagmire for months.

Buddhist Shan immigrants from Burma, and a smaller number of Yunnanese Muslim traders (called Jeen Haw in Thailand), dominated the population of Muang Pai and surrounding villages. (Muang denotes a town, larger than a village or Moo Ban.)

The Islamic roots of the Chinese Haw date from the time of Kublai Khan and the Mongol occupation of Yunnan in the thirteenth century. The Mongols used Turkic mercenaries from Central Asia to conquer and control the region, rewarding them with land and Chinese wives. Over the centuries the Yunnanese dialect replaced their Turkic language, but the soldiers' descendants continued to use Arabic for religious instruction. Their expertise as merchants, and their use of diminutive mountain horses and mules, abetted their spread in the Golden Triangle. Haw traders set up stores in towns and villages across the region and acted as intermediaries in the opium trade, collecting the poppy harvest and extending loans to farmers, while selling lowland goods. In the mid-nineteenth century the Haw rebelled against their oppressive Ch'ing Dynasty overlords and established an independent Islamic state in a large part of western Yunnan. When the Ch'ing armies violently suppressed the insurrection,

more Haw fled to the Golden Triangle with their weapons and horses. Arriving in the Shan State of Burma in 1886, the British were surprised to find the Haw armed with Remington repeating rifles, superior to the rifles used by their own troops.

The Shan, or Tai, share a cultural and linguistic heritage with the majority populations of Thailand, Laos, northeast Burma, northwest Vietnam and parts of southern China. The original Shan homeland lies west of the mighty Salween River in Burma, but large numbers of Tai speakers now live on the eastern side. During the nineteenth century tens of thousands of Shan moved into the Thai border regions and established towns such as Mae Hong Son and Pai.

The Shan, a gentle and pious people, have blended Buddhism with their prehistoric animist beliefs. Thai people regard the Shan as their distant northern ancestors and call them and their language Thai Yai, which means 'Big Thai'. Spoken Shan is much closer to Northern Thai than Central Thai and, although people from Bangkok can recognise Shan as a related language, they cannot comprehend it. While ancient words such as water, fire, wood, rock, cave, eye and hand are the same or close in all Tai-related languages, other words, tones and accents differ, which renders some of the languages mutually unintelligible.

Some old Shan words have gained impolite connotations in modern Thai, which can lead to amusing misunderstandings. One day I was sitting on a bus near Pai when an elderly Shan woman dropped a monstrous cheroot into her lap. 'Aaheee', she screamed in surprise, 'Hee mai!' The other passengers burst into laughter. In Thai her exclamation translates as '(My) cunt burns!' Shan people often utter similar profanities when something startles them. My daughter grew up in a Shan village, and when she was five, she spent time in a Chiang Mai hospital where a doctor extracted some of her spinal fluid (see 'Close to the edge'). The pain was excruciating, and Mindy let loose a torrent of abuse in Shan. Diew and I reddened, but the doctor laughed and then kindly told her he did not understand her references to dog's genitalia and fornication.

Muang Pai spreads across the floodplain of the Mae Nam Pai in the centre of a broad valley of terraced rice fields and cultivated slopes. The majority of the Shan in Burma and Thailand



reside in permanent lowland settlements like Pai and grow wet rice in irrigated paddies. Shan farmers in mountainous terrain tend to live in smaller villages and cultivate dry rice on rain-fed swiddens, like their hill tribe neighbours.

In the 1970s Pai boasted a single main street with a morning market, one dirt-floored shop selling cooked food (Duang restaurant), a few general stores run by Muslim Haw families, several Burmese-style temples, a police station and a dilapidated wooden hotel. Few people owned motorbikes, and pickups were a rarity. The late afternoon arrival from Chiang Mai of the songteow, a small truck with two benches in the back, constituted the most significant happening on an average day in Pai. At night, dogs patrolled the deserted streets while the town slept.

I liked to ride on the roof of the songteow, where the uninterrupted view compensated for the bone-jarring bumps. Only male passengers could cling to the roof rack as the superstitious Thai drivers never allowed females to sit higher than their heads. This ingrained rule extends from trucks to clothes lines. Thai people hang out their washing in a hierarchical arrangement, depending on the gender of the wearer and the piece of clothing. They place mens shirts on the top line and womens underwear on the lowest. In tribal villages we always told our trekkers to tell us before they hung out any clothing. The possibility of a farang draping her wet underwear on a spirit altar kept us vigilant. The Shan hold similar beliefs and when they bathe together in a stream, which traditionally they do naked, the women always wash downstream from the men.

On the evening of our first trek out of Pai, we walked from the truck stop to Ban Pah Yang, a Red Lahu village near a small waterfall on the edge of the valley. The Red Lahu are one of several subdivisions of people who speak a dialect of Lahu. Pah Yang refers to a forest of yang trees, a tall, straight species of dipterocarp. The villagers had cleared all the giant trees from their village, but an intact forest stood nearby.

From Ban Pah Yang we walked west and found tribal communities clinging tenaciously to their traditions. The highlanders lived in a virtual time warp, oblivious to the changes that were engulfing their country of residence. Few foreigners made it to this part of Thailand and,

for the first five years we trekked out of Pai, we met no other westerners in the towns or the mountains of Mae Hong Son Province.

Two days walk from Pai, the trails crossed Doi On, a high range, then descended into Pang Mapha. Limestone karst dominates the rugged wilderness in this district. When rainwater combines with carbon dioxide in the leaf litter and topsoil, it forms a weak acid that dissolves limestone and, over time, creates distinctive karst landscapes. We walked beneath jagged stone towers and soaring cliffs that jutted from a patchwork of evergreen and deciduous forests. Humic and folic acids in the soil had streaked the creamy white rock faces with rich shades of rusty orange. We crossed mountain streams that drained into gaping holes in the earth and emerged kilometres away, seeping from springs and pouring out of cave tunnels. Higher up, at the level of ancient water tables, the dark entrances of dry caverns perforated the exposed limestone.

The affable and gracious highlanders, living in compact villages on hilltops and ridges, added to the charms of the area. In winter, thick morning fog obscured the valleys and sinkholes, and the villages floated on tiny islands above a swirling sea of cloud.

Many farang, including me, carried a bit of ego-garbage that heightened the thrill of trekking in the Mae Hong Son border regions. Travellers in those days sought to relive the first explorer fantasy. In Pang Mapha we walked on paths devoid of Caucasian footprints and stayed with people who, at times, guessed we were aliens. Between villages, we entered caves where no humans had ever stepped.

Families in every Lahu, Lisu and Hmong village in Pang Mapha cultivated opium poppies in karst depressions and on high mountain slopes. In the cooler months we walked in foggy hollows between towering cliffs, where filtered morning sunlight backlit fields of white, scarlet and violet flowers. When the petals withered, droplets of dew clung to the mature green seedpods. Milky sap oozed from fresh slits the farmers had cut in the bulbs, and browned as the sun dissolved the mist.

We could trek between villages in Pang Mapha for 10 or more days without seeing or hearing a car, a machine or any other modern appliance. I knew we were catching the



last glimpses of ancient cultures in the mountains of northern Thailand. The physical and cultural segregation of the hill people from the outside world was ending, and more external disturbance and social modification would confront the next generation of highlanders than had confronted the 100 preceding ones.

Time was running out, and I seized the opportunity to record what I was seeing. I photographed the most traditional scenes I could find in the hills and collected thousands of irreplaceable images.

At times, I reflected on my role in hastening the destruction of traditional highland life. I helped lead hundreds of foreigners into villages where the residents knew little of the world beyond the horizon, but I believe we had trod lightly and left only one footprint in the wrong place.

# LAHU LIFE

Iguay cupped his hands around his black, betel-stained mouth. ‘We will help you!’ he shouted to the moon, as the shadow of a lunar eclipse touched its side. His youngest son rammed cotton and gunpowder down the muzzle of his rifle, held it at his waist and squeezed the trigger. In the blackness, the village became alive. More gunshots shattered the still night air. A carbine chattered. People clacked bamboo sticks together and drummed metal rice pots. The din increased as the dark outline of the tiger spirit engulfed the moon. ‘Go away! Go away!’ the old man shouted.

After an hour of generating noise, people went inside, satisfied they had frightened the dark spirit from taking their moon. The night returned to the drone of cicadas and the chirping of crickets. Iguay squatted alone, outside his bamboo hut, and examined the total eclipse. The colour of the shaded moon could help him predict the future. If the moon glowed with a whitish colour, the coming year’s rice would be expensive; if it tinted red, chillies would be worth more; and if the moon appeared black, he would fetch a higher price for his opium. Next morning I asked Iguay what colour the eclipse had been. His weathered face creased into a grin. ‘A mixture of all three’, he said.

The ancestral homeland of Iguay’s parents was in Yunnan Province, but they had crossed high ranges east of the Salween River and settled in the mountains of the Shan State, some time in the early twentieth century. Iguay, born in Burma, had migrated to Thailand as a young man before the Second World War.

Iguay was one of tens of thousands of people speaking related dialects of Lahu, a Tibeto-Burman language, who had walked into Thailand from Burma in search of arable land to cultivate dry rice, corn, chillies and poppy. But the Himalayan foothills end in northern



Thailand, and the new immigrants found they had backed themselves into the last of the forested mountains, with nowhere to go.

Diew and I admired and respected the highlanders we visited, and wanted a more intimate insight into their lives and cultures. In late 1979 we moved in with Iguay's Black Lahu family in Ban Huai Hea (Hea Stream Village), close to the border with Burma. The Black Lahu are another subdivision of people who speak a dialect of Lahu. The village name derives from a thin-walled variety of bamboo, Mai Hea, which is ideal for making woven walls and mats. We had trekked frequently to Iguay's village for several years, and he and his family always made us feel at home.

The village consisted of a cluster of small houses and rice barns on a barren mountain slope. Generations of free-range pigs and chickens had compacted and scratched the spaces between the simple bamboo huts to bare earth. A flat dancing ground occupied the highest point in the village, and from there we could watch the sun set behind a dramatic silhouette of distant ranges and jutting limestone pinnacles.

Generosity and kindness graced the Lahu of Ban Huai Hea. Iguay, an opium addict, headed an extended family that adopted us without any reservations. We shared their daily routine in the village, and work in their fields.

Roosters, squealing pigs and a horse rubbing its flank against the support poles of the house roused us early. In the first light of dawn, we pounded rice with foot-powered wooden mortars and separated the inedible husk with winnowing trays. We chopped and collected firewood from the forest near the village with hand-forged axes and fetched water in short bamboo tubes from the spring. Iguay's married daughter, Po Po, steamed rice for breakfast in a large wooden cylinder that fitted on top of a boiling pot of water she set over an open fire in the house.

Po Po, a striking young grandmother with a tall lithe frame, had inherited her father's high cheekbones and eyes that sparkled with intelligence. Ja Yor, her husband, had shaved her head with a sharp knife but had left a patch of long hair on her crown that she bound into a tight bun. She wore a knee-length, open-fronted appliquéd jacket and loose black pants. Like

everyone else, she chewed betel, and the dark red juice darkened her teeth and lips.

Po Po radiated serenity. I never heard her voice rise in anger or saw her lose her temper. She cared for her children and parents and a yard full of pigs, dogs, horses, cows and chickens. At dawn, she pounded and winnowed rice and collected water. After working all day in her fields, she gathered food for the animals. Back at home, she cooked dinner, cleaned the house and stitched clothes for her family.

Our family cultivated rice in steep clearings, more than an hour's walk from the village. Day after day, Diew and I bent over in their fields and dug out weeds with tiny crooked implements. When the rice matured, we cut the stalks with small sickles the village's aged blacksmith had hammered into shape from scrap iron. We laid bundles of stalks on the stubble to dry in the winter sun. Iguay stacked some of the bundles into haystacks; the others we beat on mats to free the grains.

After the harvest we helped carry the hundreds of baskets of rice across steep paths back to the village. Iguay's family started when the cocks crowed so they could finish their first round trip before breakfast. Over the next 10 hours of daylight, stronger people managed five or six trips.

Every family also grew corn in secluded valleys that dotted the limestone karst west of the village. After the corn harvest in September, we hoed the earth and broadcast poppy seeds. Near the fields, the Lahu had built a satellite village where they took their pigs to eat the corn, rather than carry the entire harvest back home. Rest days came once every 12 days, when everyone took a day off field work.

In February the poppy petals dropped, and the farmers used bound sets of three small curved knives to cut shallow vertical slits in the mature bulbs. They moved backwards as they worked to avoid brushing against the white sap that oozed from the cuts. Under a hot sun the next day, we scraped the sticky brown opium off the bulbs onto broad iron blades. The pungent scent of the sap overpowered the smell of hoed earth, jungle vegetation and our black, sweat-soaked cotton jackets. Iguay wrapped pomelo-sized balls of his raw opium with dried sheets of poppy petals.



People returned home from their fields at sunset. When darkness descended, Iguay split scented fresh pinewood into thin lengths and burnt small pieces on a flat stone. The blazing sap-drenched wood and a cooking fire on a small hearth provided the only light in our house. People walking in the village at night carried a handful of burning pine to light the way.

At dinner time our family of 24 members sat in a circle on the bamboo floor of the main room. We ate handfuls of the ancient strains of rice we had harvested and threshed with our hands and husked with our feet. Po Po pounded roasted chillies with salt in a wooden pestle, and the mouth-searing mix accompanied every meal. At times, she smashed in a plucked and gutted parakeet or a singed squirrel for extra nutrition and flavour. On lucky days we feasted on a wild chicken someone had shot out of a tree with a crossbow, or meat from a barking deer a hunter had downed with a muzzle-loader. Seasonal wild vegetables, shoots and vine tips, cultivated pumpkins and cucumbers the size of watermelons supplemented our rice and chillies.

At night I swapped stories and questions with Iguay. Before the days of identity cards and official records, Lahu, as well as Shan, used only first names and nicknames. They didn't know their birth dates or ages and attached more importance to relative ages within the community. I worked out Iguay's approximate age by asking how many children he had sired by the end of the Second World War. The arrival of the Japanese Imperial Army en route to Burma was one of the most memorable events in the past century. Some Lisu and Lahu elders still own the weapons they had traded for a bag of rice with destitute Japanese soldiers when the war ended. Iguay, I guessed, had to be in his mid-seventies.

After dinner, the old man always lay on his side near the fire and smoked his pipe into the early hours of the morning. With infinite patience and concentration, he moulded small balls of raw opium onto a metal skewer and cooked them over a low pork-fat flame. He mixed the cooked opium in a small pestle with burnt scrapings from his pipe and cheap headache powder. Most smokers in the Golden Triangle cut their opium with the aspirin mix. The most popular brand came in a green paper packet with a picture of a man clutching his elongated head. Iguay said the white powder helped the blend burn better.

Iguay shaped his smoking mix into a pencil-thin roll. He remoulded a small portion onto his skewer and then stuck the ball over a tiny hole in a miniature glass bottle that fitted onto the end of his bamboo pipe. He held the pipe above the flame, and his glazed eyes transfixed on the bubbling and fizzling blob. He prodded the smouldering ball with his skewer and sucked constantly, while sweet-smelling smoke wafted from his nostrils.

Between binges, Iguay roasted tea leaves on a tin plate. He dropped them into a blackened kettle set on a three-legged iron ring over the fire. He dissolved large granules of coarse salt into bowls of the bitter tea, a habit he had adopted from the Shan, and we sipped it hot.

The old man laid his head back on a folded grey blanket and closed his eyes. The yellow glow from the burning pork fat softened the creases in his forehead and smile lines around his eyes. I asked him how many pipes he smoked before he felt stoned.

‘When I smoke about 50 pipes I feel good’, he said. ‘If I don’t mix it with the ki (shit) from my pipe (the burnt scrapings from his bottle), then 20 or 30 pipes is enough.’

Iguay spoke fluent Shan and understood Kum Muang. When he wasn’t sucking on his pipe, he related tales of tribal life and explained Lahu animist beliefs. I talked of fish bigger than a Lahu house, aeroplanes that could carry everyone in his village, and anything else I could think of between the stars and the ocean floor. Iguay’s inquisitive nature sparked a desire to see more of the world, but he knew his addiction confined him to his village. He couldn’t leave his pipe for more than a day.

‘Both my father and grandfather smoked opium’, Iguay told me. ‘I used it for the first time six years ago when I hurt my stomach. Now I smoke two joi (3.2 kilograms) of raw opium each year. I want to stop smoking, but I don’t think I can. Some old men in the village stopped and they suffered for many months. They still grew poppy and couldn’t resist the temptation, so they started smoking again.’ He took a few more deep drags then let the smoke waft from his nostrils. He looked at me and smiled. ‘People say doctors in the town know a medicine that helps you stop, but they have no medicine that makes you forget.’

Opium addicts curled like overgrown foetuses, with pipes replacing their umbilical cords, on the floor of 20 of the village’s 23 houses. The headman and spirit doctor, the blacksmith



and most of the other respected elderly men smoked every night, alone by their fireplaces. The houses stood close together, and the smokers chatted with each other across the sleeping village until the cocks crowed.

Opium addiction caused few social problems for the village. In good years, families harvested more than enough opium to sustain the elders' habits. Young people, familiar with the dire consequences of opium dependency, avoided it; they knew no one wanted to marry an addict.

Some individuals from ethnic groups that didn't cultivate poppy experienced more problems. A few young Shan addicts loitered in Ban Huai Hea, and sometimes they slept in Iguay's house. These men owned only the clothes they wore and suffered a wretched, pipe-to-pipe existence. The Lahu growers treated them like slaves. They laboured in the village and fields for their employers and earned barely enough opium to function, plus a couple of rice meals. Lahu families exploited their desperation but also treated the addicts with patience and sympathy, and the situation worked for both sides.

Iguay's first wife had died giving birth. Ameer, his opium-smoking second wife, was expecting. She consumed around 40 pipes a day, and her chronic abuse had extended her pregnancy into its tenth month. 'The baby has probably turned to stone', Iguay joked. When Ameer gave birth to Ja Chee, the newborn's elderly father already had several great grandchildren.

Ja Chee entered the world addicted to opium. He cried more than other babies did, and his mother blew smoke in his face to keep him quiet. Ameer weaned her child off opium over a period of months, but he continued to receive a smaller dose in her milk. Some mothers in the village breastfed their children for five years.

My conversations with Iguay helped me partially comprehend the Black Lahu perspective on their world. The wizened elder described the multitude of *ne* (spirits) that shared the highlands. He said these invisible entities could endanger the wellbeing of his people.

Natural things like streams, trees and caves possess a spiritual essence. These omnipresent spirits of nature are usually benign and Lahu avoid offending them. They also make pre-

emptive offerings to please and appease potentially dangerous ne and, when necessary, they propitiate the ones they may have slighted.

Contemporary religions have their foundations in the animist beliefs of our ancestors. Animism has survived in the hills of the Golden Triangle partly because it gives its adherents a logical explanation for why people develop illnesses with no obvious cause. Animist rituals provide the possibility of a cure for the patient and instil hope in other members of the community. Without their faith, people would watch each other die, not knowing how to help. Shaman regularly treat people who would heal without any intervention, and the positive psychosomatic effect on the patients helps sustain traditional beliefs and practices.

Lahu communities conduct elaborate ceremonies and rituals to placate malicious spirits and cure the sick. As part of the healing process, they share their meagre assets with their deity and their neighbours.

Every Black Lahu person has seven personal spirits or aw ha (souls) (), which can detach from their host's body. The loss of one or more souls can result in serious illness. A soul could separate when, for instance, something surprises a person. Soul-calling ceremonies can occur several times a week in large villages.

A keh lu (spirit priest) or maw pa (village shaman) can call a lost soul back across a symbolic bridge and reunite it with its body. Black Lahu men split a tree lengthwise and lay one half alongside a path outside the village. The log bridges the divide between the spirit world and the human world. To lure the missing soul, a specialist takes a selection of the patient's possessions and places them at the head of the bridge. An assistant plays a tune on a long naw (bamboo and gourd pipe) that Gui Sha, the Black Lahu supreme deity, can hear. The maw pa calls out to the soul and draws it across the bridge with a length of cotton, which he later binds around the sick person's wrist.

The relatives of the patient slaughter a small pig and cook a large pot of rice. Machete-wielding men mince the red meat on wooden chopping boards and then blend in blood, shaved wood, herbs, chillies and salt. A dash of bile and a little sludge from the small intestine add flavour. They will eat this concoction raw. The butchers then chop up the mixed



guts and pan-fry them with salt. The rest of the carcass consists of thick fat attached to slivers of red meat, skin and bones. They hack it into small pieces and boil it with salt. Before anyone eats, the household head places offerings of cooked pork and rice for Gui Sha inside a sacred bamboo closet in the corner of his house.

In the late afternoon neighbours carry plates and bowls to the patient's house, and the family shares their sacrificial pork and rice with everyone in the village. At night, as an integral part of the soul-calling and merit-making ceremony, the villagers dance together in an anti-clockwise direction in the communal dancing ground and accumulate blessings for the family. The circular clearing, next to the house of the keh lu, is the spiritual hub of the community. When Black Lahu construct a new village, one of their first tasks is to excavate the dancing ground.

Homemade beeswax candles and small fires illuminate the dancing circle, as tradition dictates. The keh lu and household heads place popped rice offerings and tobacco in bamboo baskets on a flat-topped mound in the centre of the ground. Men and boys, wearing loose black jackets and black pants with a crotch lower than their knees, hold hands in an outer circle and stomp in unison. The village maidens don their finest appliquéd tops, reminiscent of graduation gowns. Saucer-sized silver disks fasten the front of their coats and thick neck rings conceal the collars. They cross arms and shuffle in rows that radiate from the central mound, like spokes on a wheel.

Prancing musicians execute exaggerated fluid steps and leaps that lead the dancers. An eerie drone issues from their elongated pipes. The monotonous melodies from pipes and the ground-shaking drumbeat of stamping feet have a hypnotic effect on the dancers and onlookers. Every time I hear Black Lahu thumping and pipe tunes, a warm feeling of nostalgia comes over me. I am sure my Lahu friends experience a much deeper sense of belonging as the sounds sink into their seven souls. The pounding beat and dance rhythms that merge with the ancient melodies have their roots in the prehistoric origins of Lahu culture. Black Lahu tell me that Gui Sha hears the low notes from their gourd pipes and enjoys the sight of happy villagers dancing together, and this gains them merit. Iguay told me a Lahu legend of how Gui Sha

had brought the first men and women out of a gourd. Other tribes have similar origin myths, which indicate the antiquity and importance of this versatile plant in Asia (see 'Piecing together the past').

The dance ends close to midnight with three clockwise revolutions. The dancers then unwind back in the sick person's house and devour a feast of boiled pig's head and rice.

A myriad of ne share the Lahu world, but the one they truly dread is a spirit associated with a sudden, unnatural or violent death. This spirit can move into the bodies of the living and cause more abnormal deaths. When faced with such a dire situation, a Lahu community resorts to exorcism.

I was visiting Ban Tong Pha, a Black Lahu village four hours walk from Ban Huai Hea, when a tree fell on a man while he was clearing the forest for a field. He died at the scene of the accident. The news spread quickly, and the villagers went into defensive mode. They pleated twisted strips of grass into a kilometre-long rope and bound on more than 100 split-bamboo taboo signs. Iguay said the holes in the loosely woven 'stars' represent 'eyes that see and scare spirits'. Men suspended the spirit-repelling rope two metres from the ground on support poles and encircled the village. They dismantled the dead man's house and looped it outside the protected area.

Elder experts then conducted a ceremony to dispel any malicious bad death spirits from the village. The community crowded into the dancing circle for the mass exorcism. While the keh lu and his helpers performed rituals and uttered incantations to drive out spirits from the assembled villagers, two men carried a model house to every dwelling. They collected ash from each fireplace and called on the spirits to abandon the villagers' homes and move into their new miniature house. They then carried the trapped spirits outside the roped off area and dumped them in the forest.

Two weeks later, the elders determined that the threat of the bad-death spirit persisted. The Lahu dismantled their village and moved onto a higher plateau.

The old settlement had straddled a ridge at the base of a 300-metre cliff. The village rice fields carpeted the nearby slopes and, at the time of the disaster, the rice was nearing maturity.



The move meant that each family had to lug more than 300 heavy baskets of rice up a steep path for more than an hour. The villagers also had to chop and carry thousands of logs and bamboo poles to construct houses in their new village.

The people in Ban Huai Hea had moved their village a short distance once before to be closer to their fields and a source of firewood. Iguay said he had lived in five or six different villages in his life, with the moves usually happening every 10 to 15 years, when most of the bamboo in the houses needed replacing anyway.

The physical separation of Iguay's village from lowland towns had helped shelter the Lahu from the outside world. An atmosphere of quaint naivety permeated Ban Huai Hea. Nobody had ever been to Chiang Mai, few had seen a car, and none could read or write. I told them that the sun stays still while the earth moves. They heard for the first time that the world is round and consists of more than forested mountains. They marvelled at aeroplanes and thought the moon was closer to their village than the road to Mae Hong Son was. The old blacksmith asked me if I had come to his earth, on a plane, from the moon.

The villagers lacked formal education, but they maintained an impressive understanding of their local environment. People living near subsistence level in the mountains of the Golden Triangle have acquired an extensive array of skills necessary for everyday survival. The continuation of Lahu identity has always depended on sustainable interactions between people and nature, on both a spiritual and practical level. When the fertility of a field declines, a hill tribe farmer will clear another plot and let the forest regenerate for 10 to 15 years before planting there again. This form of shifting agriculture is viable as long as there is enough arable land to sustain the local population. The highlanders slash and burn small patches of forest each year, a farming method that allows for rapid regrowth and helps to maintain a higher level of biodiversity than in the lowlands where Thai farmers clear vast tracts for permanent irrigated rice paddies. Unfortunately, the Thai authorities view swidden farming techniques negatively, and the restrictions they have placed on its practice have severely affected the freedom of the hill people to live, farm and move as their ancestors did – rights they once took for granted.

Black Lahu people pride themselves on their skills of conflict resolution and their strong community spirit. I witnessed one disagreement over a piece of land that was resolved by a council of elders – they decided that neither of the disputing parties would farm the plot and gave it to someone else. Iguay told me the headman and elders can impose fines or punishment for crimes and misdemeanours and can intervene in personal relationship problems. I didn't hear of any arguments between couples or the breakdown of established relationships while I was staying in the village. If there is a dispute in a compact community, everyone hears it, and the relatives and neighbours of the people involved gather at the scene to publicly discuss and solve the problem. Among the Thai and Shan, I have noticed a tendency not to interfere in minor family conflicts. In Northern Thai there is a saying, 'leuang pai, leuang mun', which roughly translates as 'someone's affair is their own'.

A Black Lahu village does not run like a commune. Families own their own fields and control their income, but mutual collaboration, particularly when planting and harvesting rice, helps maintain social cohesion. Households willingly cooperate for the common good, and everybody pitches in for development work or improvements in the village. I have seen communities use hoes and baskets to dig mountain roads more than 15 kilometres long. They build each other's houses and help with soul-calling ceremonies. People also work a few days each year for the keh lu in his fields, in appreciation of everything he does for them.

The innate generosity of the Lahu also extends to strangers. They offer a place to sleep and share their food with all visitors, and expect nothing in return for their hospitality.

The Lahu New Year celebration brings communities together with rituals that allow them to gain and share bon (merit). Each household pounds steamed sticky rice into flat buffanair (round cakes) and butchers a pig. On New Year's morning the villagers wear their finest clothes, visit other houses and leave presents of rice cakes and strips of raw pork. They wash the elders' hands with 'new' water, pay respect and receive their blessings. By mid-morning each family has amassed a mixed pile of food from every other house.

When I lived in Ban Huai Hea I pondered on the culture and society I had grown up in and that of the highlanders. We evolved independently, but the deep similarities between us



struck me as more remarkable than our superficial differences. Lahu daily routines, clothing, family values, standards of moral behaviour, worries in life, humour and other emotions were familiar. I also observed that Lahu men treat women with a high level of respect. The women in Ban Huai Hea appeared to enjoy a degree of equality within their families and community that eluded the west until relatively recent times.

Unlike Australians, and other highland groups in Thailand, traditional Lahu do not drink alcohol. All the neighbouring tribes distil spirits from fermented corn or rice to consume on special occasions. The people of Ban Huai Hea avoided liquor, but they smoked opium and tobacco, and abused betel. In the 1970s even the youngest children chewed a concoction of lime, bark from chestnut trees, tree resin and tobacco that they wrapped in a leaf from the betel vine. The mix stains teeth dark red and generates prolific saliva production. Betel chewers dribble blood-coloured spit on the ground and between the bamboo floor slats of their houses. Red stains speckle and blotch pathways, and the approaches to villages can look like battlegrounds. Tourists have asked me why the people's mouths are bleeding.

Black Lahu language sounds at times like people talking with their mouths full. I theorised that this odd sound has its origins in betel chewing; young children learn words from adults whose mouths are brimming with betel and red saliva.

Shan in the closest village to Ban Huai Hea burnt limestone and then ground the brittle rock into a fine paste that they sold in the district. The lime, which betel chewers add to their mix, has caused a high incidence of oral cancer in the hills.

The tobacco in the betel mix intoxicates novice users, and hooks them for life. I saw one group of young children, whacked off their heads after a chewing session, stare with glazed eyes at the ceiling for hours.

Smoking rough home-grown tobacco and breathing wood smoke inside houses further aggravates health problems. I have seen Lahu infants lift their lips off their mother's nipple to suck on her cheroot. Young children in our house rolled tobacco in the sheaths from corn cobs and smoked by the fireplace. 'Nothing like that early morning toke before kindergarten', one farang commented. I tried a puff, and it tasted so harsh that the smoke baulked in my throat.

The parents of the children who smoked and chewed betel appeared unconcerned and told me they had started at the same age and survived.

Against my advice, one of our young trekkers sampled a quid of betel, and his nicotine-tainted brain twirled in his skull before he collapsed on the ground in a fit of vomiting. The Lahu onlookers had also warned him of the consequences, and his adverse reaction cracked them up. The show climaxed when we had to beat off milling pigs that were fighting to clean his face.

With the 1980s, the outside world began encroaching. The villagers saw their first movie in a Shan village, four hours walk away. They laughed when they related how the Thai actors had ‘rubbed their mouths together’. The betel-chewing Lahu told me they never do that.

One day a bulldozer began pushing a road up from the valley. The villagers took packed lunches and watched the monstrous machine shove earth and trees aside. The biggest earthmover they had ever seen was a hoe. The Thai–German Highland Development Project had provided the funds to construct the road. This multi-pronged project aimed to eliminate poppy cultivation by introducing alternative crops and new farming methods, and developing infrastructure. The project involved building schools, toilets, rice barns, pigpens and water supply systems in targeted communities in Pang Mapha.

The new road would facilitate easier access for the Lahu to markets, hospitals and other government services, but the project could not filter the other outside influences the link inevitably would bring to the village. In a matter of days, the bulldozer ended the isolation that had helped to preserve Lahu identity for millennia.

Iguay died in 1985, but I continue to visit his extended family. Ja Chee, Iguay’s addicted son, became the first Black Lahu in the province to graduate from a university, with a degree in music, and he teaches in a school in Pai. The villagers elected Kali, another of Iguay’s sons, as their headman. His mother, Amee, weaned herself off opium. Iguay’s great grandchildren go to a school in the village, where the teachers forbid smoking and betel chewing.

The villagers moved 400 metres to a ridge lower than their spring, so water could flow through PVC pipes. In April 2006 electric cables arrived, and families now watch Bangkok



soap operas on television. In spite of the changes, the villagers still cultivate dry rice in highland swiddens and continue to wear Black Lahu clothing. Their animist beliefs and rituals remain intact.

Thai authorities used a mixture of gentle coercion and enforcement to eradicate opium cultivation and use. The overworked slopes near the village have lost much of their topsoil and fertility, but moving the village to another place, with land more suitable for cultivating swidden rice, corn or alternative cash crops, is no longer an option in Thailand. Many of the villagers now plant rice in fields on the other side of the border where the notorious United Wa State Army from northern Burma allows the Lahu free access, but collects a rice tax from the farmers.

The United Wa State Army has reached a ceasefire agreement with the Burmese military and expanded its control in the Shan State. Dozens of heroin and amphetamine refineries allegedly finance the army and its aggressive acquisition of Shan territory. Within earshot of the Wa camps is the headquarters of the Shan State Army, one of the few rebel organisations that continue armed resistance to the Burmese junta. The Shan State Army base on Doi Tai Leng, a steep barren ridge that extends north from the border, is visible from Ban Huai Hea.

In April 2005 United Wa State Army troops under the command of Wei Hsuehkang, a drug baron wanted by both Thai and American authorities, launched a suicidal attack on the Shan hilltop headquarters. Heavy fighting ensued for weeks, with the Wa side suffering hundreds of casualties. Many Lahu walked to an adjacent border ridge for a closer view of the raging conflict. The Wa troops fired more than 6,000 mortar shells at Doi Tai Leng, and we heard the rumble of the bombardment at Cave Lodge, 15 kilometres from the fighting. The spectators said many of the dead United Wa State Army soldiers were Lahu and Shan conscripts from Burma – young men caught up in the rebel rivalries of the Golden Triangle – who fought and died for a pittance.

The Lahu have seen their border region under the successive control of the Imperial Japanese Army, the Chinese Kuomintang, the Shan United Revolutionary Army, the Shan United Army, the Shan State Army and the United Wa State Army. The United Wa State Army,

with support from the Burmese military junta, intends to drive the Shan soldiers from their border stronghold. The villagers also have to deal with the Thai army, Thai army-trained rangers, and border patrol and provincial police. Armed Thai forestry officials further tighten the noose on their traditional lifestyle.

People have expressed concern about the negative effects of foreign trekkers in hill tribe villages. I have found that most hill people do not readily relate to passing tourists or seek to emulate foreign customs. Certainly, western consumerism and materialism has overwhelmed Thailand and filtered into the hills, but institutions like schools generate more rapid and profound modifications. Hill tribe children attend Thai government schools for 9 to 12 years. The educated youth do not aspire to become subsistence farmers, and many of them move to the lowlands and seek employment.

Apart from schools and development projects, many other factors shape the rapid and irreversible changes confronting tribal societies. Contributions come from encroaching globalisation, drug eradication and suppression efforts, the imposition of networks of roads, radio and television programs, political interference in communities, conscription into the Thai army and – God forbid – missionaries.



# CONVERTED

**Y**ellow Lahu, another subdivision of people who speak a dialect of Lahu, call themselves Lahu Shi. Slight variations in language, culture and dress distinguish them from other groups of Lahu. Relatively small numbers of Lahu Shi live in Thailand, with Lahu Nyi (Red Lahu) making up by far the biggest Lahu subgroup. Lahu Nyi call the people of Ban Huai Hea Shehle Lahu, but the Black Lahu there identify themselves as Lahu Na Meu and Lahu Pacor.

American Baptist missionaries infiltrated Burma's Shan State in the mid-nineteenth century, working hard to displace the animist beliefs of the Shan and hill tribe inhabitants. Large numbers of Lahu Shi and Lahu Na (another group of Black Lahu) converted to Christianity, long before they migrated to Thailand. Other fundamentalist groups concentrated on the Karen in the Karen State, which also borders Thailand. Karen people believe that one day a 'white man' will cross the seas and bring them a written language. When the missionaries turned up clutching the bible, they found some Karen communities susceptible to en masse conversion.

Lahu Shi converts from Chiang Rai Province built a church in Ban Huai Hea in the 1980s. The tolerant villagers welcomed the newcomers but didn't embrace their alien beliefs. The Black Lahu already had a religion, based on knowledge their elders had passed down for thousands of years.

I have met various foreign and local evangelists on a mission to replace the highlanders' faith. But they failed to convince me of the relevance of a religion that sprouted in the Middle East to a place where traditions, cultures and lifestyles evolved in the foothills of the Himalayas. I find the Christian missionaries' paternalistic attitude towards the hill tribes hard

to stomach, and wonder how fundamentalist Christians would react if animist zealots set up shop in their communities and insisted they had it all wrong.

Highlanders exhibit an enviable tolerance of disparate religious beliefs. 'What do farang believe in?' is a common query. They accept that other tribes or societies adopt diverse beliefs as a natural result of their distinct cultures. Highlanders I know question the concept of a universal truth or Supreme Being suitable for everyone.

On a mountain path I once encountered a western-trained Lahu missionary who said he walked to isolated Lahu communities and preached to the villagers. He showed me his main weapon of mass delusion. I looked into his plastic 3D viewer and rotated slides of biblical scenes. When I was a child, I had collected similar viewers from packets of cornflakes. I'm sure he raked in credulous Lahu with his indisputable photographic evidence.

Christian missionaries allege that their doctrine helps liberate hill tribe converts from an oppressive dread of spirits. They promote the fear of God, or hell, as a better option. Lahu animists, however, don't have to worry they will suffer in a Christian-style hell. They end up in the same spiritual place, regardless of whatever beliefs they held while living.

Tribal experts know how to manipulate spirits and demonstrate they are in control of their destiny. I watched one aged spirit doctor hold up a scrawny little chicken and tell the water spirit, 'I am offering a big, fat chicken'. With a mischievous sparkle in his eye, he whispered to me, 'Spirits can't see'. He placed the feathers, beak and claws on a bamboo altar and dripped the chicken's blood on them. At the end of the ceremony he cooked the rest of the sacrifice for his lunch. I asked why he left nothing but the inedible pieces. 'Spirits don't eat much; one sniff and they are full. Ha!' He laughed at his deceit.

Every year, Black Lahu specialists exorcise malevolent ne from individual houses. Each household constructs a symbolic dwelling with a tiny fireplace and food on banana leaves. The maw pa invites ne from the real house to move into their new home. He then places a spirit-deflecting, woven bamboo hoop in the doorway. The family returns through the hoop into a cleansed home, free of ne. To conclude the ceremony the shaman carries the model house, with its new residents, outside the village gate and dumps it by the path. I laughed when



one wizened maw pa spat on a discarded spirit house with a loud 'pwice' and then muttered, 'stupid spirits'.

Spirit cleansing reaches its climax at the conclusion of the Black Lahu New Year, when the villagers gather in the nearby forest. Lahu elders entice lingering ne into a miniature village, complete with houses, clay animals, rice pounders and a dancing ground. The keh lu and his helpers throw popped rice and flick blessed water to drive the ne away, while the entire community files through a tunnel of bamboo-deflecting hoops.

I feel dispirited when I see converted highlanders lose parts of their cultural heritage. Missionaries have encouraged Akha to discard their animist paraphernalia and dismantle their village spirit gates. The Mien, another hill tribe group originating in southern China, adopted many of their religious beliefs from Taoism. Yet some Mien villagers burnt precious ancient paintings of their Taoist deities when they became Christian.

In the 1980s I trekked to Ban Mae Nam Khun, a new Akha village north of Chiang Mai. Kuomintang leaders had resettled the villagers from Burma, and provided work for them in their tea plantations. The immigrants constructed the village on a ridge and erected their church on a higher hilltop, a position their ancestors had reserved for the annual village swing ceremony and courting ground. In animist communities, unmarried boys and girls once gathered on the hill above the village at dusk, danced together and sang songs that successive generations had sung for centuries. They played bamboo and gourd pipes, flirted, and sometimes consummated their relationships in the nearby forest.

A dirt aisle separated the males and females in the Ban Mae Nam Khun Baptist church. They sang, with guitar accompaniment, Akha-language versions of common western Christian songs. The youths could no longer sing ancient Akha songs, or recite the names of 60 generations of male ancestors and their migration routes, something all males could once do.

Many missionaries have based their operations in Chiang Mai. When Diew and I lived in the Riverside Guesthouse, I would cross the footbridge over the Mae Nam Ping to the day market and buy sticky rice, fried pork and chilli paste for breakfast. Baskets of fruit and

vegetables lined the footpaths around the market, and the rich smell of fresh produce mixed with greasy smoke from chicken grilling on charcoal and diesel exhaust from rows of red songteow. Merchants wearing bright sarongs, schoolchildren in blue and white uniforms, and throngs of shoppers spread onto the streets. The noise, vibrant colours and bustling crowds took my mind off the depressing atmosphere in the Riverside shooting gallery and dragon-chasing link where I lived. Most mornings, as if in opposition to the sensory mélange, two young missionaries in sombre suits handed out leaflets and sought attention with large picture boards.

In the 1980s American Mormons set up their circus act on busy footpaths near the market. These innocent-looking 18-year-olds, on compulsory overseas missionary duty, rode bicycles, wore name tags and worked in pairs. They had learnt to speak Thai in a three-month intensive course and their communication skills impressed me, but their message sounded dubious.

The Mormons told me that people had migrated from the Middle East to America 2,000 years ago. They also claimed that God had cursed black people with their colour. They said their church collects our names, without our permission, and stores them in an underground vault in Salt Lake City, to save us all from eternal damnation.

I listened to their story of the Mormon prophet Joseph Smith, the instigator of this peculiar version of Christianity. With conviction weighting their words, they told me that God had revealed the 'truth' to Smith in a message engraved on gold plates. Their prophet had showed the plates to his 'seven witnesses', who all bore the same surname. For a reason that I didn't ascertain, God retrieved the plates. If He hadn't, we might all be Mormons.

Lahu animist beliefs fit closer to my interpretation of reality. The concept that natural objects rather than supernatural entities possess a spiritual essence offers a tangible explanation for many of life's mysteries. Spirits of nature affect people in much the same way as invisible germs. When a spirit doctor diagnoses water spirits as the cause of someone's illness, he could be right. A hill tribe shaman might not achieve the success rate of his western counterpart, but when he deals directly with the underlying causes of illness rather than concentrating on treating the symptoms, he employs a holistic approach that modern



medical practitioners are beginning to embrace.

Missionaries who work with lowland Thai Buddhists have refined their methods and now concentrate on the children. The adults already possess strong religious beliefs, and are comfortable with them. Missionaries from various denominations use foreign funds to build exclusive private schools where they can openly preach to impressionable children from the middle and upper classes. In less developed regions, church groups set up missions that house children from poorer families.

Some missionaries maintain that they provide humanitarian assistance and educational opportunities, with no ulterior motives. This may be the case in certain places, but I suspect that converting people to Christianity is the prime motivation for their considerable investments.

A world-famous organisation ‘sponsored’ two of Diew’s nephews and other Buddhist children in her village near Chiang Mai. These children came from farming families and did not require material assistance, but their parents welcomed handouts. The organisation advertises globally and seeks people who are willing to donate ‘just a few dollars a day’ to support an impoverished Third World child. Fine print at the bottom of some advertisements states that the money goes to a non-profit Christian charity. Local staff told the parents the boys would receive a small amount of money each month (a fraction of what the sponsors donated) if they attended Sunday school every week. If the boys missed two weeks of Christian instruction, the organisation would revoke their sponsorship. The boys received school books with biblical messages on the covers. They asked me to translate censored letters (with return addresses and all references to money blacked out) they had received from their sponsors, via the organisation.

A concerned American, Mathew McDaniel, married to an Akha woman from Chiang Rai Province, wrote a provocative book that takes missionary bashing to new depths. In his book, *Akha voices*, McDaniel accuses missionaries of ‘stealing’ hill tribe children and moving them from their villages to missions in lowland towns. He alleges that the colonialist missionaries in Australia, creators of the Stolen Generation of converted Aboriginals, used the same

method of separating children from their families and their culture. Using blunt language, he blasts the missionaries for manipulating and brainwashing gullible hill tribe children and destroying the cultural heritage of highland societies.

I haven't met the author, but I saw his unmistakable 4WD in Chiang Mai. It looked abused, like my old Land Rover. Mud splattered the dented body, and rows of tow chains hung from a rusted roll bar on the back tray. Someone had hand-painted derogatory slogans in large white letters on the side panels. 'Missionaries Suck' and 'Missionaries Steal Akha Children' stuck in my mind.

The more controversial parts of McDaniel's book are a tirade against the Thai establishment and the violent 'war on drugs', during which thousands of suspects lost their lives. When I read it, I thought the author had stuck his neck out way too far. He even provided a mug shot and listed his personal details on the inner front cover of his book. I heard that he had crossed the border at Mae Sai to renew his visa and, on his return, Thai officials handcuffed him and sent him to Bangkok for immediate deportation.



# LIVING AND DYING

Not long after I first arrived in Chiang Mai, a searing fever had started burning off the meat between my skin and bones. Clinics tested my blood and found no malarial parasites. The quick-fix doctors handed me bags of antibiotics with names that sounded like new brands of toothpaste. Over the following days my temperature soared, and I drenched towels with my sweat. When I felt almost too weak to move from my sodden bed, Diew took me to McCormick, a hospital that American Presbyterian missionaries had established in the nineteenth century. We requested more blood tests and a place in the public ward.

A doctor of Indian descent diagnosed typhoid fever. He said the ingestion of human faeces that had washed into a water supply could cause the infection. I guessed I had swallowed the bacteria in a mouthful of water from a mountain creek.

I spent a grim two weeks in a room packed full of patients shivering from malaria, rotting with chronic infections and drooling spittle into pots by their beds. The relatives of the sick slept on the floor of the archaic building and shared beds with the patients. Despite the overcrowding, the doctors and nurses provided professional care.

Lying among the diseased and dying, I contemplated my mortality and the transience of life. Death had seemed distant when I was growing up in Australia. People died in a hospital and funeral homes concealed the corpses inside coffins. I had never been to a funeral or seen a dead body.

I saw a dead human for the first time in Bali. I harboured a morbid curiosity when I chose to visit an open cemetery of an aboriginal Balinese community in the centre of the island. I rented a dugout canoe and paddled across Lake Batur to reach their village. The villagers

squeezed their nostrils with their fingers and sniggered, but gave me directions to the graveyard.

I stood alone in an unkempt clearing on the lakeshore and stared at the body of a woman that was rotting into the earth under a simple bamboo and grass structure. The afternoon sun scorched through the gap in the jungle canopy and rivulets of sweat drenched my shirt. A pong of putrid flesh permeated the sticky air. Nothing moved, except for hundreds of flies that hovered over the dead Balinese. I didn't stay long.

I paddled my dugout back across the drowned volcanic crater. A full moon ascended above the eastern rim, and the yellow orb was mirrored on the calm water. Opposite the rising moon, an intense flame-hued sunset accentuated the silhouette of Mount Batur. The volcanic cone rose above the barren western shore of the lake, murmuring and spitting orange lava in sporadic spurts. I lay back in the dugout, as it turned in slow circles on the glassy water. Nearby, someone played a gamelan. The whimsical melodies harmonised with the exotic scene unfolding inside the crater. The magnificence of the panorama erased any thoughts of the cemetery from my mind.

I never wanted to see or smell another corpse, but in Asia death is less avoidable than in the West. When I rode on buses in Indonesia, Thailand and India, I caught fleeting glimpses of horrific accident scenes. On one of my first bus rides from Bangkok to Chiang Mai, I saw a tour bus that a high-speed collision had sheared in two. The force of the crash had strewn casualties onto the road. I maintained a stoic detachment to the road carnage, so I could continue travelling.

Hill tribe funerals in northern Thailand affected me on a more intimate level. In Hmong villages, a continuous drumbeat signifies a death and an invitation to the funeral ceremony. The grieving villagers always welcome visitors and demonstrate sincere hospitality, a trait of the Hmong.

Family members dress a Hmong corpse in a colourful embroidered funeral costume and place it, unwrapped, on an elevated bier next to the house altar. Smouldering incense sticks, offerings and shamanistic paraphernalia cover the altar shelf, and cutouts of handmade paper



plaster the wall behind. The body can lie on the bier for a week, while the family waits for relatives from distant villages to arrive. All close family members must be present for the burial.

A funeral scene inside a congested, dirt-floored Hmong house is spellbinding. Shamans perform elaborate and extended rituals that send the deceased's soul to the spirit world. One man plays a mournful tune on a long mouth organ as he dances with slow acrobatic steps. Another beats the death drum. Relatives take turns to fan away the flies and wipe the death juices that ooze from the pallid face of the corpse. They hold pieces of cloth over their noses to lessen the potent stench of decomposition. Guests sit at low tables and sip corn liquor. Women ladle bowls of stewed meat from a metre-wide wok, set on a square clay firebox, and scoop rice from a cylindrical wooden steamer. Wood smoke mixed with clouds of cooking vapours hangs in a thick haze in the windowless room, and visitors view the scene through glazy eyes that sting and shed tears.

When a person dies in an animist Karen village, the villagers dismantle the front wall of the deceased's house and construct a bamboo platform for the body. The Karen wrap the corpse in a bamboo mat and cover it with unhusked rice. They suspend handwoven cotton textiles above the platform and place the personal belongings of the deceased nearby. People walk in slow circles around the corpse for three days and nights, while they sing funeral dirges.

Death in the highlands brings distant friends and relatives together. Hundreds of mourners from nearby villages attend the funerals of respected elders. Unmarried young people, wearing their finest costumes, take advantage of the extended ceremony to meet and court each other. People crowd into the open house and ensure the family of the deceased never grieves alone.

Tight circles of visitors pass the time gambling with cards, dice and dominoes. Professional gamblers, who pay informants to tell them when people die, roll out mats and set up tables for the duration of the ceremonies. The dead person's family, with the assistance of their community, provides three meals each day for the mourners.

The Buddhist Shan in Ban Tham Lod, where Diew and I built Cave Lodge, cremate their dead in a forest clearing near the village. I have watched scores of my neighbours return to

the earth as ash. Animist Karen and Black Lahu also cremate the body, along with material goods the soul requires in the spirit world. Red Lahu, Lisu, Akha, Lua, Mien and Hmong bury their deceased with their personal belongings.

People in the region prefer to die at home, close to their relatives. The Black Lahu in Ban Huai Hea lived far from a road in the 1970s, and the journey from their village to the nearest hospital in Mae Hong Son took 10 hours. They said a large number of people who went to the hospital didn't return. The villagers have always relied on opium, herbal remedies, animal sacrifices and spirit propitiation to heal the sick. The Lahu carried their reluctant patients to town only when they had exhausted all other possibilities of a cure. The hospital's reputation further ensured no one but the chronically ill made it to a lowland doctor, which increased the likelihood of a one-way trip.

For decades, 'injection doctors' have walked the mountain trails of the Golden Triangle and brought manufactured drugs to remote villages. They administer injections and dispense pills, powders and potions to the sick and weak. These charlatans, with no formal training, sell things like saline drips to rejuvenate old people and packets of mixed western medicines for a host of diseases. I have seen a person die after an injection doctor failed to squeeze all the air out of the syringe he used.

Without exposure to modern medicines, the hill people developed a remarkable ability to survive serious wounds. In Ban Paeng, a Hmong village south of Pai, I watched an elderly shaman conduct a divination ceremony to determine which spirits had caused a woman's illness. He sported a traditional queue of long hair that sprouted from the crown of his shaved head. Above his right ear, a conspicuous semicircular scar disfigured the side of his head. An onlooker told me about it in a hushed voice. 'When the shaman was young', he said, 'he was making love with his girlfriend in the forest at night. A tiger attacked and bit him on his head. He fought the tiger and it ran away. He didn't die, and now he is a great shaman.' I asked if the shaman had applied any medicine to the bite wound. The Hmong man picked a leaf from a common weed and crushed it in his fingers. 'He put this on it, and he got better.'

I watched Lahu in Ban Huai Hea misuse drugs they had bought from backpack dealers.



People opened capsules of antibiotics and applied the powder directly to wounds. They treated stomach upsets with a single dose of Tetracycline and mild fevers with excessive amounts of aspirin. I warned that the injection doctors' medications would weaken their natural immunity, but nobody stopped using them.

The abuse of drugs such as antibiotics concerned me, but one common home remedy shocked me. People claimed the best way to cure a toothache was to pack cavities with DDT powder.

In distant regions, DDT sprayers were the only Thai government employees the hill people regularly met. The sprayers worked for anti-malaria programs, and every year for decades they coated villages with the poisonous powder. They evacuated families from their dwellings and then used hand-pumped backpack sprayers to turn the walls and floors white. When the ignorant villagers moved back into their homes, DDT dust soon covered their clothing and bedding. They ate their rice with powdered hands, and cooked and consumed chickens that had feasted on dead insects. The sprayers handed out extra powder to anyone who asked. Our Lahu family kept a sack of DDT on a shelf in their house and Po Po, Iguay's daughter, showed me how she smeared it by the handful on the bamboo floor to kill bugs.

The widespread spraying of DDT by low-paid government employees with no protective clothing, gloves or masks reminded me of my job as a noxious plant controller in Australia. While I was soaking paddocks, and myself, with 2,4,5-T, I wondered how the cows that grazed on the sticky wet grass handled the chemicals, or if the toxins entered, and never left, the food chain.

Shan addicts scattered balls of DDT mixed with mashed sesame into streams and collected large numbers of poisoned fish, which they 'preserved' with salt in bamboo containers. Iguay and other growers swapped their opium for the putrid-smelling fish. I was unable to convince him of the dangers of the cumulative effects of the poison. It was only when Kuomintang soldiers based along the border introduced the death penalty for DDT fishing that the practice waned.

We carried medicines with us while trekking to treat common ailments. One young

man with a fresh, deep hole in his forehead came to see me. He said his muzzle-loader had backfired and shattered the wooden stock. I removed a large splinter that had pierced his skull, cleaned out the wound and gave him a complete course of antibiotics, with firm instructions on when to take the pills. The hole healed without any problems.

On another occasion Lahu friends took me to a house in Ban Huai Hea where Ja Te, a father of three small children, hadn't eaten or drunk anything for days. His family believed that he was already dead and an evil spirit occupied the shell of his body.

Ja Te sat by the hearth in his house. His eyes bulged from his gaunt skeletal face, and yellow skin stretched across his emaciated frame. He gave off a stench reminiscent of a corpse. His aged father, Ja Vwa, sat nearby and called out in Lahu for the spirits to leave his son's body and allow him to die a natural death.

I pinched the leathery skin on Ja Te's forearm, and it didn't recede. My immediate concern was his state of severe dehydration. Ja Vwa helped me roll his son onto his back. Ja Te's arms and legs remained bent and stiffened in a crouch position. I mixed a solution of sugar, salt and vitamin pills in warm water, then dripped the mix into his mouth. We massaged it down his throat, like fattening a goose.

Next morning, the spirit-possessed living corpse astonished the Lahu. Ja Te was walking, unaided, around the village. He came to our house, and the girls inside fled in terror while he sat by the fireplace and devoured a small pot of rice. He started to work his fields a few days later. Every time he met me in the village, he removed his hat and bowed as a sign of deference, which was very touching.

The Lahu believed Ja Te had undergone a miraculous return from the dead. I could have portrayed his recovery as an act of divine intervention, if I had a different agenda, but I wanted everyone to know that sugar and salt dissolved in boiled water had saved Ja Te's life. I impressed upon them to use it on every dehydrated person, especially infants with diarrhoea.

Diew and I led treks to a Lahu Nyi (Red Lahu) village in the hills between Chiang Mai and Chiang Rai, where we always stayed in the welcoming home of Ja Oo, an opium addict with a large family to support.



On one visit, Ja Oo's 20-year-old daughter, Na Seu, writhed with pain on the floor of the house. She was nauseated, and excruciating headaches prevented her from sleeping. Her family carried her to a spirit temple next to the house of the pujong, the village spirit priest, where they place offerings made from clay, bamboo and cotton on the bamboo floor. The pujong sat behind a wall in an adjoining room and entered into a trance. He trembled and uttered incantations, while Na Seu's relatives listened for clues that could point out which spirits they must deal with and what specific offerings they should give.

Ja Oo said he had already sacrificed many chickens and a pig but had failed to appease the spirits that caused the illness. He said Na Seu's condition was worsening. The severity of her symptoms concerned us, and we told her father she needed to see a doctor.

The village was five hours walk from the closest road, and it would take a full day to reach a hospital in Chiang Mai. The next morning, Ja Oo and his neighbours built a stretcher. We carried Na Seu out to the road and rented a songteow to transport her and a group of relatives to Chiang Mai.

In the city the Lahu spread along the footpaths in single file, just as they walked on the small trails in the forest. When we had to cross a road, the group waited until there were no vehicles in sight before sprinting en masse to the other side. Their greatest fear, apart from being hit by a car, was getting lost and not being able to return home.

We checked Na Seu into McCormick Hospital. The doctors there had diagnosed and cured my typhoid fever, and I felt confident they could diagnose what was wrong with Ja Oo's daughter.

Na Seu's devoted young husband, Ja Na, stayed by her bed, all day and night, for the next 20 days. Friends and relatives came when they could. They stood by her side and shed tears as her hearing and sight deteriorated. Her doctor told me she had meningitis, but he couldn't determine what had caused it. After three weeks in McCormick, Na Sue was dying, and the doctor finally admitted he could do no more for her. We moved her to the government hospital at Suan Dork. McCormick wanted a small fortune for her failed treatment. I went to see the hospital director with Ja Oo, and we convinced him to accept the little money Na

Seu's family could afford.

At Suan Dork the doctors conducted spinal taps and other advanced diagnostic tests. They concluded that Na Seu was suffering from cryptococcosis, a rare fungal disease that causes meningitis. (Since the onset of AIDS, it is far more prevalent.) The doctors suspected Na Seu had inhaled the fungus from bird feathers. Ja Oo confirmed that his daughter had cleaned pigeons shot by village hunters.

Prompt treatment can cure cryptococcosis in its early stages, but Na Seu's meningitis had progressed too far. The doctors operated to relieve pressure on her brain and injected morphine.

One morning a young doctor told us she had died during the night. He asked Ja Na whether he minded if the hospital performed an autopsy and used the body for teaching purposes. Cryptococcosis was an uncommon disease, he said, and Na Seu's body demonstrated its advanced stages. The doctor offered to waive all charges for the treatment and cremation of Na Seu if Ja Na gave permission.

Ja Na wanted to talk to the village elders. For a Lahu from a traditional village, the request stretched the limits of comprehension. Ja Na had just lost his wife, and the doctors planned to cut her open in a classroom and burn her body. He wanted to take her back home for a traditional Red Lahu burial. We took Ja Na to the hill tribe radio station in Chiang Mai, where he broadcast a message for Ja Oo.

Next morning a throng of relatives and friends, resplendent in red and black costumes with thick silver neck rings and engraved buttons, arrived at Suan Dork. Ja Oo accepted the hospital's offer. If he had decided to bury his daughter in the village cemetery, he would have had to find a Thai driver willing to transport a dead body and then pay a prohibitive amount of baht to compensate for their paranoia. Centuries of Buddhism hadn't displaced the Thai's ancient animist fear of spirits of the dead.

We walked, in single file, to the morgue. The big building, set behind the Suan Dork wards, stored the bodies of patients who had died in hospital, together with victims of accidents and violence.



The Lahu bunched together outside, and we peered through plate glass at rows of stainless steel square doors that lined the walls of a large room. Their unease at going inside a place stacked with dead people was palpable. Pi Hoong, the evil spirit associated with unnatural or violent deaths, terrified them, and Chiang Mai's main morgue undoubtedly housed a plethora of bad-death spirits, in cold storage.

The Lahu clutched each other as I escorted them inside. I asked the caretaker, who looked well past retirement age, to show us the body of Na Seu. He directed us to one wall, shuffled over, opened the door of a refrigerated cupboard and pulled out a sliding shelf. We all gasped and shuddered when we saw the shrivelled body of a wrinkled man. I hoped he had died of old age. 'Sorry, not this one', mumbled the caretaker. On his next attempt he put on his glasses, checked the name on the door and opened the correct one.

The family changed Na Seu from a hospital gown into a new Red Lahu costume. The old pujong placed homemade beeswax candles in her clenched hands, lit them and uttered a few phrases. Everyone was trembling, anxious to leave the cold haunted room. Ja Oo slid the shelf back in and closed the door. We strode out of the building and nobody looked back.

When I returned to the village Ja Oo gave me a fine crossbow he had made, as a token of his appreciation. To my amazement, and that of the assembled crowd, I hit a distant leaf target on my first shot. Rather than fire another arrow and risk spoiling my reputation, I let the children play with the weapon. Ja Oo already called me pujong. He didn't think I had any spiritual powers; John was just difficult to pronounce.

# JAUNDICED

**D**iew and I worked for three years to save enough baht to travel outside Thailand. I yearned to visit India and Nepal and figured that our savings would last a few months on the subcontinent. I also needed a new visa. Thai consulates in Malaysia were reluctant to issue successive entry permits for long-staying foreigners. On my last trip they had refused to stamp another 'tourist' visa in my passport.

Crossing overland through the sealed borders of Burma was not an option, so we flew into Calcutta with a dozen cheap watches strung around our waists and calculators stuffed into our packs. India at that time was a closed market and foreign goods were hard to come by. Travellers told us we could flog them to Indians and quadruple our investment. Duty-free Scotch whisky and American cigarettes complemented our contraband.

Our minimal budget constrained our options for eating and sleeping and the way we travelled. We soon got used to living on street food, sleeping with bed bugs in dives, and squashing into third-class carriages on trains.

We headed north from Calcutta to the quaint mountain town of Darjeeling on an antique, tiny and sluggish steam train. Following a rudimentary map, we trekked from Darjeeling towards the Sikkim border in the shadow of Kanchenjunga, the earth's third highest mountain.

Diew had never seen snow. On our first day out of town, we ploughed into it, knee deep. The frigid and desolate route we chose caught us unprepared. We wore all our clothes, wrapped ourselves in Thai sarongs and layered spare socks on our hands, but the cold air still numbed our fingers. Sodden running shoes encased our near-frozen feet, and the chill rose up



our leg bones to our teeth.

When we trekked in the subtropical Golden Triangle and chose the wrong path, we spent an unplanned night in the wilderness. In the Himalayas, you gambled with your life at unmarked forks in the paths.

Late one evening we came close to perishing in the snow near Philut, a tiny police outpost where India, Nepal and Sikkim meet on the map. Walking towards the border triangle, we chose the wrong split in the trail, and only a coincidental encounter with two Sherpa herders saved us.

The ethnic Nepali police in Philut welcomed us into their cramped but cosy hut. A group of Indian medical students from Calcutta arrived, and the mood in the outpost changed to open resentment. Although the Indian government employed the police officers, they told us 'Indians no good'. The police offered the shivering students space on the stone floor, while they tucked us into a warm bunk laden with eiderdowns. The police told us to use our sleeping bags as pillows. We slipped them to the students when the officers retired.

The next day we followed a small path along the Sikkim border for more than 30 kilometres. After years of trekking in the mountains of northern Thailand, mere foothills of the Himalayas, walking in the shadows of the highest peaks in the world exhilarated us. The hospitable Sherpa people, distant relatives of the Tibeto-Burman speakers in the Thai highlands, welcomed us into their homes. The people confirmed my belief that highlanders interact with strangers in a more open and amicable way than lowlanders do.

We left Darjeeling by bus and crossed into Nepal. In Kathmandu we bought heavy woollen sweaters, met up with friends and planned another trek. One member of our group, Paco Grande, was a Spanish-American from New York who had trekked in northern Thailand with us. Paco, a freelance photographer, suffered from deteriorating 3 per cent tunnel vision. Paco said he saw more detail in his photographs than in the actual scene. He slung a Nikon with a wide-angled lens around his neck and shot dozens of rolls of fast, 400 ASA, black and white film.

We climbed towards the Helumbu valley for a week of trekking between Sherpa villages.

Paco kept to the path by staring at a pair of white shoes in front of him and keeping them within his narrow field of vision. He soon acclimatised to new instructions such as, 'If you slip, fall right. There is a 500-metre drop on the left.'

Late on our second day out, while crossing a high pass, a snowstorm obliterated all footprints. The storm left us pathless and disoriented and, when the snow thickened to knee deep, we urgently sought protection. We stumbled onto a small slate-roofed open shelter for goats, and huddled on the frozen floor in sub-zero temperatures.

I suffered from chronic diarrhoea that night. Two or three times an hour I raced outside and squatted in the snow. Uncontrollable shivering followed each attack and I lay awake, trembling in my thin sleeping bag as my gut cramped, waiting for the next bout.

Diew and I trekked with Paco for a week and then moved on to Pokhara for more. Our first destination was the renowned Annapurna Sanctuary, a glacier-gouged basin set in a circle of some of the world's highest mountains.

Three days out of Pokhara, the trail wound out of the last village on the way to the sanctuary, and we trekked to Hinko Cave. The small grotto overlooked a deep valley etched into the Annapurnas by pulverised rocks and glacial ice. Near the cave entrance, we gathered armfuls of dry grass for insulation.

We departed Hinko by torchlight at four the next morning for the five-hour trek up the valley. We planned to reach the sanctuary early and return to the cave before hazardous afternoon snowstorms blanketed the higher slopes. In the eerie pre-dawn silence we traversed a treacherous avalanche field of ice and shattered rocks.

On the previous day a lone trekker had asked us to rouse him when we passed his campsite. He had continued beyond the cave, crossed the avalanche, and erected a tent at the base of an awesome wall of stone. Our wake-up calls echoed off the kilometre-high cliff. We saw him again at the sanctuary, where he was the only other visitor. He shook our hands and thanked us for saving his life. He said he had crawled out of his tent when we had shouted to him. Minutes later, he heard a rumbling sound and watched boulders smash into his tent and destroy his camera. He flattened himself against the cliff wall as more debris from a small

avalanche pelted down the face. He sustained a few minor cuts.

Annapurna base camp felt like one of the loneliest and least hospitable places on the face of the earth. A circle of peaks, 7,000 to 8,000 metres high, loomed above us. The porcelain-white mountains glared stark against the rich indigo blue of the pure atmosphere. The sheer untamed beauty of the scene, and the altitude, left me breathless. I sucked the thin frigid air into my insatiable lungs. We saw showers of ice cascade down higher slopes, seconds before they rumbled. We climbed to the edge of a valley and looked down on a glacier that was silently grinding out the sanctuary basin.

The forbidding environment heightened my awareness of the fragility and insignificance of my life. Like nature's version of culture shock, the sensation gave me goose bumps. I had experienced the same reaction in Thailand, deep underneath the earth in gigantic unstable caverns, and again off Perhentian Besar when I swam alone on the edge of the deep blue void.

Our 1980 trek in Nepal reached its premature turnaround at 5,000 metres elevation, when altitude sickness walloped Diew on Tharong Pass, high above the holy village of Muktinath. I piggybacked her for a short distance, but the increase in altitude aggravated her symptoms.

Other trekkers had told us a frozen Japanese man lay by the path ahead of us. We heard that the corpse had lain there for days, and the police on either side of Tharong Pass had deemed it outside their area of responsibility. If disaster struck, we couldn't rely on outside help. We gave up and headed back down to Muktinath.

Ten days later we walked into Pokhara, then continued on buses and a third-class train to Varanasi in northern India.

Cheap food from roadside stalls in India assaulted my stomach with unprecedented ferocity. Nobody sold bottled or purified water, so we washed our meals down with water from the nearest tap. In June the northern plains swelter, and quenching our constant thirst took priority over caring where the water came from.

Dysentery plagued me for most of the time I was in India. Near the end of our stay I contracted hepatitis. Maybe I caught the virus on a houseboat in Srinigar where our hosts washed dishes in the diluted sewage of Dal Lake, or in Ladakh where the locals adhered to



medieval standards of hygiene and water boiled at low temperatures due to the altitude.

On the torturous two-day bus ride from Islamic Kashmir to Tibetan Buddhist Leh in Ladakh, my 'Delhi belly' squirted out in gushes without warning. I shat in my pants and, when I could, squatted anywhere, in public by the road, metres from the bus door. At food stops I hovered over stinking open pits. I heard of one traveller who, afraid of losing his gear, had worn his backpack while he squatted on a board and had toppled in backwards.

'The first sure sign of hepatitis is white shit', a resident European in India had told me. 'Then your eyes and the bottom of your tongue turn yellow.' Squatting over a toilet in a cheap hotel in Rajasthan, I watched in horror as a brown turd, halfway out, changed to fish-belly white. I felt faint and had to lean against the stained wall. The person who had enlightened me to the early symptoms had also talked of people whose jaundiced livers had swelled until they ruptured. 'Hep can kill ya, man', my informant had said between tokes on his chillum (a carrot-shaped, hollow clay pipe that Indians, and tourists, use to smoke hashish). The smell of onions frying in old oil wafted into the toilet and I threw up on the floor. The creepy shrieks of peacocks on the rooftops of the flat-topped buildings nearby further twisted the sinews of my stomach. When on a bus heading for Jaipur, I had seen vultures peck at a dead man by the side of the road. Crouching, doubled over a squalid toilet and staring at the contagious wastes of my diseased body, I imagined the hard-eyed vultures tearing meat off my scrawny carcass with their curved beaks.

Maybe I had shared too many chillums, and the Afghani charas had bent my brain. Had I sucked too hard and swallowed infected spit from the pipe of a Shiva worshipper? 'Boom shanka', we said as we passed the chillum like a revered religious icon back to the dreadlocked Indian Sadhus. I bounced along the walls back to my room and told Diew we had to flee India while I could.

It had been a bad day altogether. Earlier, we were visiting Jaipur zoo, looking at tigers, when a local man dashed up to Diew and grasped her breast. Indian men in the cities had brushed her chest with their elbows as they walked down the street and had thrust their groins up against her on crowded buses. When she could, she spat in their faces. The latest sleazy male

had crossed the line, way too far to spit on.

The blatant grope attack incensed Diew. She grabbed her attacker and flung him violently onto the ground. His group of friends moved towards us, and I reluctantly prepared to fight. An onlooker ran into the melee, shouted at the other Indians and drove them away. Together, the three of us dragged the groper to the zoo entrance gate. A police officer stationed there told us to restrain the man while he went to get reinforcements.

Swift Indian community justice kicked in. Scores of turbaned men surrounded us and took turns to punch or boot the molester. A man hobbled forward on crutches and wobbled his head. 'What is all the commotion for?' When I told him, he raised a crutch and started to beat the man we had captured with rapid hard blows. The peer punishment was plunging out of control, and no police were in sight.

The prospect of dealing with official Indian justice alarmed me. Apart from wasting hours or days of our budgeted time, I had read reports in local papers that alleged police had amputated hands and gouged out eyes of captured rapists. I was already feeling feeble and nauseated, and the unruly crowd trying to bash the life out of the man at my feet didn't help. My diarrhoea-ravaged body couldn't take much more. Diew gripped my arm and tried to pull me away.

I raised my hands in the centre of the crowd, thanked the judges, jury and instant retribution squad for their concern, and ordered the fondler to 'piss off', fast.

My last encounter with a single-minded mob in India was in Calcutta market. After a long train ride from Jaipur, we had to wait for days in the eastern city for our flight back to Thailand. Shrewd, merciless merchants swarmed over me, and I collapsed on a stool beneath a barrage of brutal bargaining. I had no choice but to undergo this last ordeal. Diew had suffered enough, and she dared not leave the Salvation Army dormitory alone. The black marketeers knew they could get the jaundiced tourist's remaining watches off him for less than he had paid for them. Our frugal spending had allowed us to stay for five months in northern India and Nepal, but our cash had run out. I was flogging our remaining assets to buy drugs, and to get home.

Indians I had talked to advised me to treat my liver disease with Ayurvedic medicine. I spent our last rupees on 100 brown capsules of Liv 52. Indians had probably suffered from hepatitis for thousands of years, and they must have experimented with countless herbal cures and figured out the most effective treatment. My health was deteriorating, and I was ready to put my faith in anything that might improve my plight. I wished I could find a Black Lahu keh lu to drag my sick soul across the divide, back into the land of the living.

We flew to Bangkok and headed home. Back in our room in the Riverside Guesthouse, in the company of drug dealers and desperate junkies, I rested for two months and allowed my liver to recuperate. My pus-coloured eyes matched the skin that covered my emaciated frame, and people avoided me. I shunned alcohol, ate fresh papaya seeds and took all of my Liv 52 capsules. I think they helped me recover without any permanent damage to my liver.

We had no money left. Diew continued running the treks, but I needed a job that required minimal physical activity. A year earlier, my wonderful mother had bought me a Nikon FM2, and I had taken hundreds of Kodachrome slides in Thailand and India. I wrote an article for Australian Geo magazine, 'People of the Golden Triangle', which the editor accepted for publication. I followed up with 'The opium growers'.

I now know that if I hadn't travelled to India and caught hepatitis, I may never have written the Geo articles. And if John Dunkley had not read them, the direction of my life might not have veered off the surface of the planet so abruptly. But, back then, there was no way I could have foreseen what lay ahead.



# BUSTED

**O**ur trip to India and Nepal had drained my health and swelled my liver, but left us longing to visit another challenging destination.

Roaming foreign countries with a minimal budget and without a guidebook is an excellent way to wander off the regular tourist trail and ratchet up the thrill level a few notches. We drifted across China for three months in 1982, with few objectives in mind. Our aimless travels went smoothly until the Chinese police arrested us in an Akha village, high in the hills near the Burmese frontier.

Not long after Mao's Cultural Revolution had wrought havoc across China, the government opened the borders and turned the country into an obstacle course for foreign visitors. Strict travel restrictions forbade visits to poorer provinces and many rural areas. The Public Security Bureau required all foreigners to obtain permission before visiting any city.

At state-owned restaurants, the only places serving meals, diners purchased coupons at an outside counter. We didn't know what they sold, or the prices, and we ended up with potluck meals. We picked our travel destinations and accommodation with similar abandon. Hotel staff, in the select places where foreign tourists could stay, often ignored us or said they were full. Maintaining a sense of humour, and developing extreme patience, helped us deal with the perceived absurdities we confronted.

China turned out to be an enigma. We met some Chinese who seemed to despise foreigners, while others treated us as honoured guests. One restaurant manager ushered us into his crowded establishment and then ordered a family away from their table. They stood nearby, holding their half-finished meal and staring at us with blank looks. We protested, but the manager insisted we take their seats, still warm from the evicted diners. He laid the only

tablecloth in the restaurant, brought out special silver cutlery, and served us personally.

We faced continual hassles and misunderstandings, but our perseverance paid off. The sheer intensity of the modern and historical Chinese cultural barrage inundated us, and an outstanding diversity of superb landscapes and architectural marvels enchanted us.

We yearned to escape the fascinating but demanding Han-dominated areas and visit autonomous regions of the ethnic minorities. In particular, we wanted to reach the Tai Lue stronghold of Sipsong Panna. The literal translation of Sipsong Panna is 'Twelve Thousand Rice Fields', but the name more likely refers to 12 districts of an ancient Tai Kingdom, centred in the far south of Yunnan Province. Thai historians regard Sipsong Panna as an original homeland of the Proto-Thai. The government had relaxed restrictions on visiting the area and opened Jinghong, the main town, to foreign tourists. In Kunming, the capital of Yunnan, we obtained permission to visit the region for three days, the maximum time allowed.

Jinghong struck us as a city of contrasts. Unsmiling Chinese immigrants, clad in drab Mao suits, looked like revolutionary clones. The fine-featured Lue women offset the dull conformity of the Hans. They flashed open smiles with a glint of gold-capped teeth, displayed flowers in their hair and wore colourful thin blouses. Polished silver belts secured their multicoloured floral sarongs.

The luxuriant subtropical greenery, quaint wooden houses, Buddhist temples and amicable locals reminded us of home. To top it off, Tai Lue language was mutually intelligible with our Northern Thai.

Walking out of town, we felt as if we were stepping back in time to a Thailand before modernisation, tourism and the corrupting influences of capitalist culture. The official hotel in Jinghong, where public security police officers in Kunming had insisted we stay, receded in our thoughts.

At dusk we reached a typical Lue village in the countryside. Irrigated rice fields bordered a haphazard congestion of aging wooden structures. Tall hand-hued poles stood on large river stones and raised the floors of the Lue houses three metres off the ground. Hand-sized ceramic shingles roofed the spacious dwellings. Wooden panel walls, dark with exposure,

complemented the antiquated appearance of the houses.

An old man, squatting on his broad balcony, summoned us up his steep staircase. We sat down on teak floorboards that a century of bare feet had polished to a rich lustre. The Lue elder poured steaming tea into stained ceramic bowls, rinsed them three times, and then filled them. We accepted the welcoming drink, with the fingertips of our left hand touching our right elbow, a polite gesture in the Golden Triangle. The old man wore loose cotton pants, and swirling patterns of indigo tattoos covered his midsection. Once, every Lue and Shan man sported protective tattoos from below his knees to his waist. He seemed pleased to have visitors from Thailand, and he welcomed us to spend the night in his house.

The old man asked us to relate stories of Thailand. Every Tai person we met in Sipsong Panna knew the Kingdom was downstream. The Mekong River divides the Jinghong valley, heads south between Burma and Laos, then flows along the Thai border, past the hut where Diew and I had stayed on our first trek. Many Tai Lue in China have relatives in northern Thailand. In the nineteenth century rulers in Thailand had coerced thousands of Lue to migrate south from Yunnan to help repopulate northern Thailand and rebuild Chiang Mai. The capital of the once-flourishing Lanna Kingdom had become an abandoned city after a series of devastating wars with the Burmese.

The old man described the excesses of the Red Guards and life under Han rule. He said the Maoists had forced the Lue to abandon their monasteries, smashed Buddha images and disbanded the monkhood. Our host told us, with pride, that the temple in his village had now reopened and housed one monk and two novices. Other locals we talked to conveyed similar optimism. They said the Han rulers had reformed, and the country would not sink back into such intolerant anarchy again.

Next morning we walked further from the town towards the mountains, bypassing Lue villages along the way. Some people told us they had never seen a Caucasian and asked Diew if I was her father. They presumed I was Thai and attributed my fair hair to old age. In one village the inhabitants fed us bananas, poured cups of tea, and insisted we stay with them overnight.



Tai people occupied the valleys, and Lahu and Akha villages dotted the hills. The scene felt so familiar that we hatched a plan to trek along the Burmese border and stay in hill tribe villages. We intended to avoid Han settlements – and, with luck, no one would report us to the authorities.

We walked for four hours and arrived in an Akha village, high above the valley floor, on the afternoon of our last legal day in the region. We communicated with the surprised but curious villagers using a mix of Tai and Lahu. I showed them photos of Thai Akha, and an exuberant crowd gathered. The headman ushered us into his house and invited us to spend the night. Home-distilled rice whisky and tea-darkened glasses appeared. Women brought in bowls of bamboo shoots, wild fungi and rice. Villagers filled the floor space, and we talked, laughed, drank and feasted together until late at night.

All of a sudden, the crowd fell silent and drew away. Four official looking men walked up into the house and confronted us. One of the intruders spoke Tai and informed us they were Chinese police. He inspected our travel permits, then said that his ‘boss’ had instructed them to escort us back to Jinghong.

The police had walked an hour up a steep muddy slope from the nearest road. Heavy rain was buffeting the thatched cogon-grass roof, and we asked if we could leave in the morning. They said their orders were to take us to town that night. We waited until the downpour eased, then apologised to our hosts. The headman looked nervous and unsure of how to deal with the situation.

Our escorts carried lanterns and led us to two police motorbikes at the base of the hill. Diew climbed into a sidecar and stepped on an AK47 rifle the police had left unattended for two hours. In Thailand, police carry their weapons with them everywhere. ‘The Chinese cops must have shot every criminal in Sipsong Panna’, Diew said to me in English.

The police seemed apologetic and affable. It was after midnight when they stopped in the first village and insisted on waking the shop owner and buying snacks for us. The stale biscuits tasted like sweet chalk. I dumped mine while the drivers concentrated on manoeuvring their bulky bikes between hundreds of potholes along the dark tree-lined road. We sat back in the

khaki capsules, with a cool wind in our faces, and in less than an hour covered the kilometres that had taken us three days to walk. The bikes stopped at the official hotel in Jinghong, and our escorts showed us a room.

Strident thumping on our door roused us early. A woman, squeezed inside a smart, white Public Security Bureau uniform, escorted us to the hotel office. A surly Han officer, also clad in stark white, sat behind a huge desk. He motioned for us to sit and then began berating us in rapid Mandarin. A Tai interpreter translated his onslaught into Lue, but we struggled to keep up with her. He declared that we had broken the law by walking in a restricted border region and staying in village houses without permission. He demanded that we tell him where we had stayed on each illegal night. I flinched with guilt. Had we endangered the people who had provided us with lodging? We lied and said we had forgotten the names of the villages.

Our mendaciousness infuriated the interrogator. His shouting intensified and he held our passports in his raised hand, shaking them. He picked up a piece of paper on his desk and read from a list the names of the villages we had stayed in, and the names of our host families. His menacing eyes bored into us, as he paused between each name. He then handed out forms and instructed us to write a 'self-criticism'. The grilling was starting to feel like foreplay before the system screwed our minds in a re-education camp.

The enraged cop, with seemingly sweeping powers, coerced us to write full confessions. I wrote that the autonomous region had impressed me, as the villagers in Sipsong Panna maintained higher living standards than many of the highlanders in Thailand. In some respects, they also enjoyed greater independence. We had noticed Tai Lue children attended schools where the language of instruction was their own.

I had no idea who would read my words, but I stated that we had insisted on staying in the villages and pressured our hosts to provide accommodation. I also lied about the respect the Tai people we met had for their Han overlords.

The officer placed our statements in his briefcase and then informed us our crime incurred a fine. He said it was up to us whether we paid the fine. Giving us an option appeared to be out of character. I asked what would happen if we didn't pay. His eyes narrowed and I could

sense the contempt in his glare. He slammed our passports into his briefcase and locked it. Hands up in supplication, we agreed to pay \$20 each rather than risk indefinite incarceration. When we handed over the cash, he returned our passports but maintained his demeanour and ordered us to leave the region. The next bus departed in 23 hours, so we strolled around more Lue villages near the town.

I later heard that after our deportation the Public Security Bureau declared Sipsong Panna temporarily off-limits to foreigners. The closure of the region to tourists, soon after it had opened, didn't perturb me, but the possible backlash our hosts might face concerned me more. I hoped payment of the fine had forestalled any planned repercussions.

In hindsight, when the public security police officers captured us and truncated our trek along the Burmese border, they let us off lightly. We knew we had crossed without permission into a restricted zone, but we thought we could avoid arrest for at least a week or two.

Twenty years later, I crossed illegally into China again and visited another Akha village near the border. I was travelling in northern Laos with Nung, my second wife, and two American friends, Dave and Bill. We had driven 60 kilometres north of Muang Sing on a new but rutted road to the apex of the Golden Triangle, at the point where China, Burma and Laos meet on the Mekong River. The Lao police, staffing a small post in the border triangle, were surprised to see foreigners at the end of the road. There were no flat areas near the river suitable for camping, so I drove my 4WD pickup a few kilometres south to an Akha village on the border.

The Lao Akha wore handmade clothing and lived in simple bamboo and wood houses. A jovial headman invited us into his home and served tea. Within minutes of our arrival, Nung was helping the women on their side of the divided house cook dinner. After a cup of tea, the headman lay down in his spot by the fire and smoked opium for hours, while young girls wearing head-dresses and short indigo skirts massaged Dave, Bill and me – an honour Akha extend to male visitors. A crowd gathered after dinner, and we talked until late. In the morning, between pipes, the headman suggested we walk across the unguarded Chinese border and visit his Akha cousins.



A dramatic transformation from slashed and burnt fields to orderly rubber plantations marked the border. We walked further along a well-made road that wound between irrigated rice paddies and reached a relatively built up and prosperous Akha village. Groups of people, dressed in the clothes of typical Han farmers, gawked as we strolled between their houses. Apart from the faces of the people and their language, little could distinguish the village as being Akha.

Word of our visit would soon spread, so we didn't stay long. If Public Security police officers arrived, they would escort us to Jinghong, the nearest town, where a record of my earlier misdemeanour would confirm my criminal intransigence.

# UNDERGROUND

**D**iew and I returned from China in 1982 to the northern hills with renewed enthusiasm and a deeper appreciation of the unbounded freedom we had once taken for granted. In Thailand we could walk and stay anywhere we wished, both above and below ground.

Thai authorities enforced no restrictions on cave exploration. The inherent and perceived dangers acted as the only constraints. A claustrophobic fear of entrapment in an inescapable maze of small dark tunnels discourages many people from ever stepping into a cave.

Highlanders in the Mae Hong Son karst avoided the dark forbidding holes where evil spirits and dangerous animals lurked. Huge caves with water pouring in or out were the most uninviting places they knew. The locals dared not enter underground river passages with flaming pinewood or bamboo as their sole source of light.

Part of the challenge of caving is to conquer rational trepidation and irrational phobias. Some people leave the earth's surface to escape. Deep underground, far from the complexities and hardships of life on the outer crust, everyday concerns evaporate. Buddhist monks seek the stony silence of caves to remove themselves from disruptive influences. Alone and undisturbed, they can liberate their minds with meditation.

Another, less cerebral, perspective lumps caves with anacondas. A cave can swallow humans, pulverise them in its twisted internal passage and squeeze out all their energy. I have dragged my battered body out of constricted holes and felt regurgitated.

My caving craving goes deeper than dodging reality and experimenting with masochistic abuse. Big caverns and beautiful formations humble me and invoke a sense of childlike incredulity. The possibility of major discovery lures me underground and, like anyone with a

habit to maintain, I find the time and the minimal investment required to light the way.

Cavers tend to push themselves to the limit. The more prudent temper their drive with a measured degree of caution. When cavers find a new passage, they weigh their capabilities against the risks involved in exploring it. Caving is a serious sport with little room for bad judgment. But, cavers are human.

In an unexplored system with unknown quantities of cave beyond the next bend, I find it hard to stop. The deeper I go, the greater the temptation to continue. It is easier to explore a new passage while you are there than to return on another expedition. But I have learnt through experience to exercise restraint, resist the urge to continue, and turn back with more than enough light, or good air, to get out.

As a child in Australia I had toured Jenolan, a tourist cave complex with concrete pathways and electric lighting. Tham Nam Lod was the first wild cave I entered. Tham (pronounced 'tum') is Thai for cave, and Nam Lod means water flows through it. The local Shan simplified the name to Tham Lod (Through Cave) and named their village after it.

In November 1977 Diew and I led an exploratory trek into Pang Mapha. We walked in from the dirt highway to Ban Tham Lod, which consisted of two rows of new bamboo huts. One of the village founders pointed towards the cave entrance and gave us bundles of pinewood kindling to burn for light.

A few of the more adventurous trekkers and I waded into a huge river tunnel and entered the dark zone. Near a curve in the river, our flaming torches lit up a steep wall, above which we could see another cavern. We decided to climb up to have a look.

None of us had any caving or rock-climbing experience. I wore rubber sandals on my feet, held burning wood in one hand, and clung to the slick rock face with my other hand. It was a 'slip and you die' sort of climb that I now know real cavers would attempt only if they could set up a rope.

We made it to the top, but the prospect of returning the same way petrified us. My group spent hours searching every split and turn in the upper cavern for an alternative way out. In the highest room, tree roots latticed the ceiling and the air smelt stuffy. Our breathing



quicken and the torch flames began to sputter and burn low. We knew we would lose our lights if we pushed on any further. With shaking legs, we climbed back down to the river.

We continued wading downstream to where the Nam Lang flowed out of the mountain. In the back of the enormous entrance cavern, the Shan had built a wobbly ladder that ascended to another higher level. Near the top of the ladder, a woman was sweeping up a thick spongy layer of swift droppings to sell as fertiliser. Small bugs, the colour of bird blood, infested the quivering piles. She pointed to a dark hole in the wall and said, in Shan, 'Go in there'.

Deep within the dry side cavern, away from the overpowering stench of the entrance chamber, weathered sections of hollowed and carved logs, up to seven metres long, lay in scattered piles. Fragments of coarse pottery and broken bone littered the floor nearby. I found a human molar and guessed we had entered a burial chamber of people who had lived in the area long before the Shan.

By the time we exited the side chamber, the sun had set and thousands of swifts were swirling at high speed in the confined space between the cave roof and the top of the ladders. Their creepy high-pitched chirping echoed off the rocks around us. Dozens of dazed birds clung to our hair and shirts as we slid across the slimy floor in a nightmarish Alfred Hitchcock like dash for the exit.

The initial taste of wild caving had pumped up my adrenaline to new levels and introduced me to a different kind of adventure. What really fascinated me, though, were the ancient coffins the higher cavern had preserved for hundreds or possibly thousands of years. I asked Putao Loi, the oldest man in Ban Tham Lod, about the wooden artefacts. He said Shan called the chamber Tham Pi Maen. Pi is a spirit or ghost and Maen, he explained, can mean 'protruding' or 'coming from nowhere'.

'Pi Maen is very tall but invisible', he said. 'It comes out of the caves to steal rice from our fields.' He claimed he knew of several other caves in Pang Mapha with similar gom Pi Maen (Pi Maen coffins).

Back in Chiang Mai, I searched in vain for more information on Pi Maen caves. It seemed that foreign and Thai archaeologists were either unaware of or uninterested in the prehistoric

cemeteries. The dearth of knowledge, apart from local folklore, further spiked my curiosity and spawned deeper desires that I then didn't quite understand.

Dark entrances riddled the limestone hills in the district, and I imagined that in at least one of these caves an ancient sarcophagus had survived the passage of time. If I could locate an undisturbed burial, complete with a full skeleton and grave goods, the find would be, for me, on a par with Howard Carter's discovery of Tutankhamen's tomb. I planned to ask every elder I met in Pang Mapha, search every known cave, and scour the karst for holes the locals had never entered. I had no idea I would spend a big chunk of my life under the Golden Triangle on a quest that would never end.

# CAVING

**L**oong Darp, a long-serving police sergeant from Soppong, the biggest market village in Pang Mapha District, was the first Thai to query my curiosity with the district's caves. The sergeant asked to see all my cave photographs and I obliged, pleased a local official showed interest in what lay beneath the hills.

When I met the sergeant again, he said his subordinates were suspicious of my caving exploits. They doubted I expended so much time just searching for caves. Loong Darp told me the Soppong police thought I was looking for Second World War treasure.

We shared a bottle of Mekhong whisky, and I plied the sergeant for more information. In a slurred whisper, he confided that Imperial Japanese troops had plundered a large amount of gold ornaments from Burma. When the war ended, a retreating Japanese army platoon from a base near Mae Hong Son had stashed six wooden crates of the treasure in a cave. I promised to keep the information secret, and he related the details of the story.

The sergeant told me that the trucks transporting the gold from Mae Hong Son to Chiang Mai had broken down at Ban Mae Suya, a small Shan village close to Pang Mapha District. The Japanese soldiers had then loaded the crates on the villagers' elephants. The valuables, he hissed in a conspiratorial disclosure, were worth at least 400 million baht, but if I found the gold, I couldn't keep it. Thai law, he said, stipulates that any recovered treasure remains the property of the government. Then, as an afterthought, he calculated that even if 20 people split it with us, we would get 20 million baht each. I re-filled his glass and pressed him to reveal everything he knew.

A Shan mahout in his 90s, from Ban Mae Suya, had told the sergeant the three elephants couldn't handle the excessive weight. The old man said the soldiers had removed the crates



near Doi Tham Makhaeng, the highest mountain on the road to Soppong, and ordered the mahouts to return home. The mahout said he heard a loud explosion as he rode his elephant downhill and presumed the soldiers had blasted a cave mouth and sealed the treasure inside the mountain.

In the late 1970s and early 1980s I searched every grotto I could find near villages on our trekking routes. The possibility of discovering a beautiful cave or an intact Pi Maen coffin was sufficient motivation, but the rumour of millions of dollars worth of gold further encouraged me to inspect every aperture.

I felt like a cave grunt or an amateur treasure hunter, rather than a speleologist. I lacked a deep understanding of the scientific, cultural and other values of the underground wilderness I loved to explore. But when my specialist mentors did arrive, by coincidence, they spent years teaching me everything they knew.

John Dunkley, a well-known Australian caver with a special interest in the caves of Thailand, was researching information on Thai caves in the National Library in Canberra when he found copies of the Geo articles I had written in 1980 after I had returned from India with jaundice. I had mentioned Pang Mapha, Iguay and the Black Lahu family I had lived with in 1979. He contacted me, initially through the publisher and then through my mother, to gather information on vanishing streams he had located on topographic maps of Mae Hong Son Province.

Dunkley came to Thailand in 1983 for a reconnaissance trip, and I escorted him to several impressive caves, including Tham Lod. He believed we could locate bigger systems that drained sinking streams such as the Lang and Mae Lana.

Dunkley came again in early 1984, and we concentrated on finding the resurgence of the Nam Lang, a point not obvious on any map. The Nam Lang flows through Tham Lod before sinking into impenetrable holes in the valley floor 15 kilometres downstream. The river probably re-surfaced in the valley of the Nam Khong, the major tributary of the Mae Nam Pai.

We caught a songteow to Ban Mae Suya, the village nearest to where we thought the Nam

Lang joined the Nam Khong. According to Loong Darp, Japanese soldiers had loaded their looted gold onto elephants in this village. Intensive questioning produced no positive leads on a way into the subterranean course of the Nam Lang. People had seen where the river flowed out from beneath rocks but didn't know of a cave entrance. Nor did anybody offer information on caverns with treasure chests.

We were unrolling our sleeping bags on the teak floor of the headman's house when a young man carrying a rifle came to see us. He had heard what we were looking for and said he knew where the cave was. He told us he had hunted deer, high above the outflow of the Nam Lang, and had seen a cave 'so big that many buses could fit into its entrance chamber'.

Next morning the Shan hunter escorted Mark, who was an old school friend, Dunkley, Diew and me on a four-hour trek to the cave. We walked to the junction of the Nam Khong and the Nam Lang, downstream from the outflow, and then headed up the Nam Lang to a set of small waterfalls. Upstream from the cascades, the river poured in gushing chutes from holes between boulders. Our guide led us up and over a tract of hut-sized blocks towards a 300-metre-high, red-streaked cliff. We could hear the rumble and feel the tremors of the river forcing its way through constricted slots beneath our feet.

At the base of the cliff, we stared down into a chasm the river had carved out of limestone bedrock. I guessed that more than 50 buses could stack up inside the cavity. At the back of the chamber, the Nam Lang flowed from a 40-metre-high dark slot, above which dangled a 10-metre-long stalactite.

The hunter said he had never entered the cave. He hid his rifle, and together we slid down a steep mud ridge to the dark waters of the Nam Lang. The river flowed cold and deep, with a strong current. After two hours of wading and clambering over rocks, the cave showed no indication of ending or diminishing in size. Our hand-held torches lacked the power to reveal the enormity of our discovery.

Dunkley returned a few months later with better lights. Diew accompanied us and waited alone outside, near the resurgence, while Dunkley and I pushed three kilometres into Tham Nam Lang.

Water had gouged the river tunnel out of solid rock that layered 300 metres thick above our heads. Our spotlights failed to reach the highest ceilings, and monstrous shadows moved with us as we walked. We passed walls and formations no eyes had ever seen. Our beams lit up stalagmites taller than trees and tiered banks of shimmering white and amber flowstone up to 100 metres long. Stunned fish, thicker than my leg, slapped against us in the river.

We traversed piles of broken boulders, hundreds of metres across, and moved in and out of the river. Each immersion drained heat that our bodies had worked hard to generate. At one point, far from the entrance, we rested on a gravel bank. Dunkley lay on his back, wheezing and waiting for a second wind. I couldn't have carried him out if his energy levels had dropped any further. I shivered at the thought of what would happen if both of us twisted an ankle or sustained more serious injuries. Diew wouldn't dare search for us alone, and the nearest cave rescue team was in Australia.

Five hours later, after emerging with two of our six torches still working, I began to appreciate the dark side of this fringe sport. But, despite the obvious dangers, I was hooked and willing to take more risks.

Dunkley had shown me that the secret to discovering a big cave is to follow a stream to a sinkhole, and then find where it flows out of the limestone. The outflow caverns are usually larger than the inflow ones, and sediments and debris are less likely to block access to the downstream entrances.

Periodically for six years, Diew and I had trekked to a Lisu village, Ban Guet Sam Sip, set on a high limestone plateau south of Soppong. The name translates as 'Village of 30 Sinkholes'. The depressions around the sinks trapped rich soil nutrients, and the encircling limestone outcrops shielded crops from the sun and wind. When the first rains fell in May, Lisu farmers planted corn in the cleared depressions. Near the end of the wet season, they broadcast millions of tiny poppy seeds on the same fields. The Lisu said all the run-off that disappeared into the sinkholes in their cornfields emerged at the base of the mountain, 800 metres lower than the plateau, and cascaded into the Nam Khong at Susa Falls. Nobody had seen a cave.



But there had to be one. The water was dropping almost a kilometre from scores of sinks. The cave, if we could find a way into it, would contain waterfalls tens or even hundreds of metres high.

From the nearest road, Diew and I cut through pathless forest for four hours to reach the resurgence. Milky cave water issued from submerged gaps between a jumble of limestone boulders at the base of a red cliff. The silent stream then divided and fanned across a jungle-choked delta, before dropping over a series of stepped travertine waterfalls into the Nam Khong.

Little sunlight filtered through the tangled vegetation above the sump, and a perpetual gloom shrouded our campsite. I imagined bears and tigers prowled behind the moss-encrusted boulders on the slope above the pool, and serpents coiled around the long vines that drooped from the canopy.

We didn't own a tent, so we laid our sleeping bags on the ground. After dark, the flickering light from our fire cast dancing shadows on the enveloping jungle. I lay awake, staring at the greenery and trying to distinguish the cautious approach of predators from the unsettling noises of nocturnal insects and scurrying small mammals. Rustling sounds and animal noises persisted all night, and I stoked the fire until we ran out of wood.

Thick daybreak mist heightened the creepiness of the place. The fire had died and dew soaked our sleeping bags. I left Diew asleep and climbed the boulder slope up to the red cliff. I walked along the base of an overhanging face, inside the drip line, and sank up to my ankles in dry dirt. A waft of guano-scented air descended from a higher level, and I followed the stench to a cave entrance.

A layer of mist floated above a flat dirt floor in the entrance cavern. From the cave mouth I could see at least 50 metres of passage opening up, 10 to 15 metres high and 20 metres wide. The cave was dead quiet. I clapped my hands and shouted towards the dark recesses to forewarn any predators they had company. Nothing stirred. The bats must have already returned from hunting and flown deep inside.

I climbed down to the floor and walked into the back of the chamber. I shone my torch

down a steep mud bank and saw the Nam Susa in a dark-walled tunnel. The river flowed fast but made no sound. The still air smelt like the cave had trapped it in the dark for millennia. I dared not continue alone into the eerie depths.

# BLIND DRUNK

I returned to Ban Guet Sam Sip to ask the Lisu if they had seen any cave entrances on the plateau. The village was the largest in the district and comprised around 100 thatched huts that faced down a barren hill slope. The Lisu floored some of their homes with packed earth. Other houses stood on poles, and sheltered tethered horses under their bamboo floors. The balcony of every simple dwelling commanded an uninterrupted view across the karst, all the way to distant ridges in Burma. Poppy fields and limestone pinnacles bordered the southern edge of the village.

No permanent streams flowed nearby, and the villagers relied on a few small springs for their water. At the end of the dry season, after five months without rain, their meagre supply sometimes dried up.

The perennial stream from the main village spring trickled a few hundred metres before disappearing into an enormous 40-metre-deep hole with sheer rock walls. A foul smell of rotten carcasses rose from its dark depths. The villagers said this was the only open sinkhole near their village, and they dumped pigs that had died from disease into the pit. Fortunately, I lacked the rope skills and equipment needed to explore it.

I had timed my visit to the village with the onset of the Lisu New Year. Every year since 1978 I had attended the annual celebration in Ban Guet to experience one of the most colourful cultural events in the Golden Triangle. A five-hour uphill walk from the nearest road had helped preserve the village's traditional Lisu customs, and I felt privileged to be one of the few outsiders to join in the festivities.

I invited our friend Paco and Dave, another American friend, to join me for the celebration in 1984. I hadn't seen Paco since our harrowing time together in Nepal. Despite his



deteriorating tunnel vision, he was revisiting Thailand to take more photos of hill tribes.

Dave, like Paco, had been on a couple of Diew's trekking tours and we had become close friends. Dave had escaped the stress of electrical engineering to see the world. He left his home in Washington State for three months every year and travelled independently. We have shared many borderline adventures, and Dave's dependable common sense has helped keep me safe. He can withstand my crude humour and my afternoon strolls that often turn into arduous eight-hour forays of hacking into thick undergrowth and scaling cliffs. Sometimes we find a significant cave or prehistoric artefacts, but usually we end up with nothing to show except scratches and bruises.

We walked to Ban Guet from Soppong, with Paco following Dave's footsteps by staring at his shoes. I wore less visible rubber thongs, my usual footwear when walking on mountain paths in the dry season. We climbed up onto the plateau, and the track wound by scores of poppy fields. Some of the flowers were blooming, while others had wilted. The Lisu growers, busy scraping opium from the naked seedpods, flashed betel-blackened smiles as we walked by.

Tens of thousands of Lisu have migrated from Burma into Thailand in the last century. Their ancestors lived on high mountains in Yunnan, near the source of the Salween River in Tibet. Ancient Chinese customs and beliefs have influenced their culture. Lisu venerate the spirits of their ancestors and maintain shrines for them in their houses, eat with chopsticks and play Chinese musical instruments. The language Lisu speak in Thailand contains hundreds of adopted Chinese words, and intermarriage between Lisu and Yunnanese is common. Both ethnic groups celebrate their New Year in late January or early February, on the same new moon date.

The Lisu have gained a reputation for their resilient independence and enterprising spirit. They work hard in their fields and are expert poppy cultivators. Lisu farmers established their villages in mountainous areas where poppy flourished, and grew relatively wealthy from opium sales.

Haw traders once paid for Lisu opium with rupee coins from colonial India. Families used

the money to buy necessities like salt, material for clothing, blankets, and iron for making farming implements and weapons. Parents paid the bride price for Lisu maidens with the silver coins, and village leaders calculated fines for crimes and misdemeanours in rupees. Village silversmiths smelted the coins and fashioned distinctive jewellery.

Lisu women and girls wear loose gowns made from the brightest fabric available and embellish the tops and sleeves with appliquéd layers of more vivid material. The garish lime, aqua and acid-pink costumes stand out against the drab earth-tinted villages. Throughout the New Year period, they show off new costumes made for the occasion. Before the ceremonies, women and girls spend weeks stitching rolled strips of cloth by hand and attaching woollen pom-poms to the ends. Hundreds of these strands form a multicoloured tasselled tail, which they dangle from the back of their waistbands. Single men hang their tassels in front of their green or blue pants. Lisu girls bedeck black turbans with more dyed wool, or anything bright, and wear red leggings below their loose black pants.

The unmarried youths further adorn their costumes with ornate silver jewellery in a competitive display of wealth. Maidens don silver-studded black vests with silver buckles. Tiered silver dangles swing from cloth collars, polished chains loop between their earrings, and enamelled silver butterflies and fish hang from their necks. Everyone wears heavy bangles and carries a handwoven shoulder bag encrusted with more silver trinkets. Lisu youths in full ceremonial costume look stunning, and during the New Year the sound of jangling silver pervades the village. They take pride in their lavish appearance and use the occasion to flirt and woo each other. As part of the courting fun, groups of young people gather on the edge of the village and sing improvised ballads back and forth in a spirited display of wit.

The festival participants consume substantial amounts of rice and pork. Every house pounds steamed sticky rice and makes a hundred or more rice cakes. People offer the chewy cakes to spirits and consume them as snack food. Lisu fatten their pigs on corn until their bellies scrape the ground. If a family can afford it, they butcher their biggest pig for the festival. A few houses distil and sell strong corn liquor that lubricates and intoxicates the adults for days.

Ancient taboos prohibit people from leaving or entering the village until the important

ceremonies have finished. Our host, a respected elder, insisted we observe Lisu customs and stay until the end of the festival. Meanwhile, his extended family plied us with phenomenal amounts of food and liquor that diminished any chance of an early exit. We sat on woven rattan stools and ate from bowls placed on circular bamboo tables. Women kept our cups full and ladled steamed rice and pork stewed with mustard greens from bottomless pots. The bitter mustard leaves, the main winter vegetable in the hills, grow in poppy fields.

We shared our meal with the family's long-dead relatives. Behind us, on the uphill wall of the house, a shelf held a row of small bowls that represented individual ancestral spirits. Each bowl had spent three years on a grave altar. For the duration of the New Year, our hosts burnt incense and left food for their ancestors.

Every extended family that maintains an ancestor spirit shrine erects a cut pine tree in their front yard. From the branches, they suspend offerings of rice cakes and strips of raw pork for the sky spirits. On the first evening of the festival we joined hundreds of people holding hands and dancing together around bamboo poles and the symbolic trees.

The dancers move en masse from house to house, from dusk until dawn. Wealthier households lay out feasts of rice and pork for everyone, and the successive hosts demonstrate their generosity by pouring local whisky into their guests. Their insistence, combined with our reluctance to offend anyone, caused us to toss down, and throw up, innumerable glasses of the potent brew.

Dance leaders play Chinese-style three-stringed instruments, bamboo and gourd panpipes and bamboo flutes. The repetitive tunes ease multiple rings of dancers on successive anticlockwise revolutions that stir the village dust until the roosters crow. Elders squat near fires and sing ancient harmonies, while the younger men and boys fire rifles and set off firecrackers.

An incessant racket of exploding fireworks and M16s chattering on auto awakened us early on New Year's morning. It had been a prolonged night of drinking and dancing, with little sleep. Paco, Dave and I climbed a steep slope behind the village and joined a misty sunrise offering ceremony for Apa Mu, the guardian grandfather spirit. Men from every house had



brought basket lids containing rice cakes, pork and silver heirlooms. They laid the offerings with their rifles at the base of a roofed shrine and placed bottles of home-distilled firewater on a shelf. We all squatted in front of the shrine and held our palms together in front of our chins as a sign of respect. A spirit doctor conducted a brief ceremony, then the men downed the liquor and fired their guns into the air.

We staggered, sloshed again, back down the hill. Near a spring, Paco blundered into a sludgy quagmire of mud and pig shit. He sank to his knees, and a rusty nail punctured his shoe. He hopped out of the bog with a waterlogged board nailed to his foot.

I sobered up fast, while Paco chain-smoked pipes of the local painkiller. I stuck the point of Dave's penknife into his foot and gouged out the imbedded black gunk. He needed tetanus shots, so we propped him on a horse for the long ride down to the clinic in Soppong. We paid a nominal fine for leaving the village before the end of the ceremonies.

# HEAD FOR THE HILLS

**O**ne month after the 1984 Lisu New Year, Diew and I decided to move to Mae Hong Son Province. We shared a dream of building our own guesthouse and leading a peaceful life in the hills. We also considered starting a family.

Uncontrolled development and modernisation was eroding the quaint charm that had enchanted me when I first arrived in Chiang Mai. Increasing commercialisation and competitive rivalry had transformed trekking into a backstabbing business. Other tour guides were leading tourists on some of the routes Diew and I had trekked for seven years. While we accepted that we didn't own the trails we had blazed or possess any finder's rights over villages, sharing overnight stays in small villages with other tour groups somehow undermined the exclusivity of the tribal trekking experience.

After years of babysitting tourists, we were also suffering from trekker fatigue. Guiding foreigners to hill tribe villages earned us little money, but required a level of dedication and enthusiasm that was hard to maintain. We loved the walking and the tribes, but the trekkers had worn us down.

While we were away on one of our last treks, an incident in our city residence cemented our desire for a change. The seedy guests and despicable management in the dodgy guesthouse we called home didn't notice when someone broke into our room and stole our collection of tribal textiles and costumes.

We had bought exemplary pieces of weaving, embroidery, appliqué and batik from their makers in the hills. The splendour of the textiles reflected the skill of the women who had created each item. Traditions were fading, and soon tribal women would no longer produce such intricate artwork or use handspun fibres and natural dyes. We thought we could

safeguard a few fragments of the highlanders' heritage. When a thief took them, he ripped out a part of our spirit. I sensed what a Lahu might feel after the loss of one of his seven souls.

The culprit turned out to be a heroin-addicted cousin of Sam, the powder-powered head dealer, and he had already sold the textiles for a fraction of their worth. Sam attempted to ameliorate the sad situation with brutality. He dragged his cousin into the guesthouse and beat him senseless, while the young man grovelled pathetically at our feet. We cringed with repugnance.

Diew and I split for the hills without paying the last six months rent. We were never coming back. We had managed to stay there for seven years only because we had spent most of our time trekking, and it was the cheapest room in town.

We chose Ban Tham Lod, a day's walk from our Black Lahu friends, as the ideal place in northern Thailand to build a new future. We had trekked to and spent nights in Ban Tham Lod since 1977, and the Shan villagers knew us well. The headman and a council of elders said they had no objections to us staking out a piece of unused land and building a guesthouse, except one old man who expressed concern we would try to convert the village to Christianity. I guaranteed that would not happen.

We held little cash and owned few possessions. We had saved 20,000 baht, less than \$1,000, from more than 100 treks, but had learnt that life is more interesting when it isn't easy. I had skipped university, but years of trekking in the Golden Triangle and side trips to India, Nepal and China had filled my educational vacuum. The lessons I had learnt far outweighed the money I had earned.

Lacking any investment capital, we figured we couldn't go wrong. Bob Dylan got it right with a line from his inspirational song Like a rolling stone: 'When you aint got nothin, you got nothin to lose.' Janis Joplin took it further with Kris Kristofferson's Me and Bobby McGee: 'Freedom's just another word for nothing left to lose.'

The nail hole in Paco's foot had healed without any complications, and he wanted to help us move from Chiang Mai. He had acquired a large sum of money from a divorce settlement with Jessica Lange, the star in King Kong. Paco gave us 50,000 baht. His generous loan,



indirectly from Hollywood, financed the purchase of the Land Rover.

The rover looked good, with a fresh paint job that hid the buckled and plastered aluminium body panels. The previous owner, a police officer, hadn't bothered to register it, and the salesperson had to spend a day at the motor registry office bargaining for fake registration papers. The shady dealer also threw in a licence for Diew, who had never driven a car, but 'bo pen nyang' or 'no worries mate', this was Thailand of the 1980s.

A few days later the same dealer sold a car to Shan heroin traffickers. It didn't blow up on the way out of the car yard like ours did, but after the new owners had packed it with 7,000 sticks of dynamite and parked it at the residence of Kuomintang General Li Wen Huan, it levelled the wall of the compound and damaged 40 other houses in Chiang Mai. A traveller staying in the Pun Pun Guesthouse on the other side of the road told me he had put down his Singha beer to suck on a bong when the front wall blasted in. A piece of chandelier landed in the Riverside Guesthouse, almost a kilometre away.

We chose to build our lodge on a forested hill slope near the Nam Lang, 500 metres upstream from Tham Lod. Hill people clear all the forest trees in their village. 'Monkeys live in the forest; people live in clearings', Iguay had said. Against the advice of our neighbours, we left the trees on our land and tried to build in places where they couldn't topple onto our structures. We miscalculated once; in 2005 a large dead tree smashed into my son's room. By chance, no one was home that day.

Paco volunteered to help erect the frame of our big open house. 'You steer and I'll push', our chief financier and visually impaired builders labourer offered. Our friend Dave brought additional muscle and barn-building expertise. He had first demonstrated his numerous talents when he rewired the Land Rover after an electrical fire destroyed the cables, minutes after we had handed over Paco's cash.

When living in Ban Huai Hea, I had watched the village men erect a durable home in a single day. The innovative builders improvised with whatever materials they could scavenge or hack from the forest with their machetes and hatchets. They dug the postholes with a metal-tipped stick in the morning, and the family lit the first fire on their new hearth in the evening.

The house was complete, with a door, balcony and spirit closet, and would last for more than a decade. Our guesthouse would take longer to build than a Lahu house, but we had plenty of time.

Before constructing the main building at Cave Lodge, I visualised a shape and size. I kept the design simple and avoided drawing a plan. Our land sloped down towards the east, which meant the front of our house would face the rising sun and full moon. The future, we thought then, looked bright.

Once I had come up with a design, I cut a piece of straight bamboo eight sork long. One sork is the distance between the elbow and fingertips, a common measurement in the northern hills. My personalised measuring stick standardised the spaces between the holes for the house posts. We excavated the arm's length holes in the red clay subsoil with a digging stick and an old bowl. For rectangular or square structures, the diagonal measurements between corner postholes must be identical. Years later, when I worked on hexagonal bungalows, the bush mathematics got perplexing.

We chose to build the main house on an incline, which is ideal for drainage, but the slope meant we needed house posts of different lengths. Shan builders use a simple method to ensure the tops of the posts are level. They place a piece of bamboo in every hole and mark a desired floor height on the stick in the highest hole. They then fill a clear plastic hose with water and use the water level in each end to mark the other pieces of bamboo.

Using local methods, I numbered the bamboo sticks and laid them next to my log post collection. The bottom of each length of bamboo lined up with the base of a suitable post, with the longest one belonging in the lowest hole on the slope. I then marked the floor levels on the wooden posts.

We used teak posts for our house. Teak wood is easy to saw, split, shape and notch. It also resists rot and termites, is relatively light and in our area it was free. When Shan farmers clear a section of forest for rice fields, they slash the undergrowth, fell the trees, leave the wood to dry and then set fire to it. After the rice harvest, I dragged out the charred logs with the rover.

We notched the posts on the ground. On each log I measured one kuep, the space between

the thumb and longest finger of an outstretched hand, above the floor level and made another mark with a piece of charcoal. I sawed into each mark a few centimetres, then hacked out the notches with a hatchet. Another bamboo length, four or five sork long, measured the distance up each post to the higher notches for the roof frame.

I bribed my neighbours and friends with offers of free beer and the like to help lift the heavy posts into our shallow holes. Two slightly intoxicated people can push up the top of a long post with a couple of bamboo lengths bound into a cross. Another person uses a flat board to lever the bottom into the postholes. Once the poles were upright, we rammed the excavated earth back into the holes.

Shan men ringbark mature teak trees by chopping a circle in the bark at the base of the tree. When the wood is dry, they fell the tree and saw the logs with long, two-person blades. My neighbours use the illegal timber for building houses, temples, public buildings, furniture, fences and pigpens. They discard the wood near the bark and use the resilient heartwood. Annual forest fires destroy the leftover pieces of teak.

Opium addicts in our village trim the rejected boards, before they burn, with their machetes and carry them to the village. In the 1980s they sold them for 5 to 10 baht a piece. We preferred to use the waste lumber rather than order the death of trees, and the price was within our budget.

To finance the construction of the lodge, and keep our local addicts high enough to carry in heavy loads of wood on their skeletal shoulders, we built a guest bungalow before working on the main house. We lured travellers from the bus stop in Soppong, and they paid for their room and our boards, at a rate of 5 or 10 planks a night.

We shaped the offcuts for the main frame to fit into the notches, then nailed them to the posts. Once the frame was up, construction began on the roof and floors. Mai bo, the Shan name for the biggest type of bamboo in the forest, is an excellent material for broad floor and wall panels. Mai sung, a smaller variety, has the structural strength to support floors and roofs. We made our rafters from mai kaow lahm. This thin-walled, lighter bamboo is also famous as the cooking container for a sticky-rice delicacy.



The rover made frequent trips into the forest to haul out our cut bamboo. I flogged it hard on the roads and forest tracks, and the vehicle's external appearance soon resembled its beat-up underbelly.

The ideal period to chop bamboo begins at the start of the dry season, when golden fields of mature rice carpet the slopes and the clear winter air carries a fragrance of ripe grain. Bamboo at least one and a half years old and cut at this time is less susceptible to borers. When we chop bamboo at other times, we soak it in water for a month or two, or build a smoky fire inside whatever we build to kill the beetles that reduce its lifespan.

A sharp steel machete is the best implement for making bamboo panels for walls and floors. The local builders slowly revolve a bamboo tube while they chop lengthways, about a finger-width apart, into every regularly spaced joint. They then slice the tube along the easiest course on one side, flatten it, and bash off the interior joints.

Strong bamboo like mai sung or mai bong makes the best floor supports. They are spaced one sork apart and secured with twisted thin strips of green bamboo. A new floor retains the delightful aroma of fresh forest, is as clean as the bamboo that slices an umbilical cord, and is ready to sleep on.

Our Black Lahu friends supplied the cabbage palm leaf tiles for our first roof. Since then, we have bought leaf tiles from our Shan neighbours. At the end of the cool dry season people collect the supple leaves of mai tueng, a common deciduous dipterocarp tree, from the forest floor. They gather them in the early morning when dew has moistened the freshly fallen leaves. The tile makers fold the leaves over split lengths of bamboo, three or four sork long, and attach them with thin strips of bamboo. They must do this soon after gathering the leaves or they dry and crack or split. More bamboo strips bind the tiles onto our mai kaow lahm rafters. We lay higher tiles on top of the lower ones and space them close together. If the roof slopes at an angle that ensures adequate drainage, the tiles can remain leak-free for two or three years. A fireplace in the house helps the tiles last longer, as the creosote in the smoke poisons the bamboo borers.

As the main house neared completion, we tossed up whether to call the place Cave House

or Cave Lodge. Years later, after a sequence of chaotic events shook the lodge, we realised that Cave Inn would have been a more appropriate name.

The lodge took off. Within months, word of mouth spread and drew in hundreds of travellers. Our guests rode on buses to Soppong and then walked north for two hours to Ban Tham Lod. The imperialist Japanese had employed thousands of Thai and hill tribe labourers to widen the original track between Chiang Mai, Pai and Mae Hong Son. They had planned to use it as an invasion route into Burma. Forty years later, long sections of the road remained unpaved, but the new wave of foreign invaders came in peace.

The guesthouse had been open for a year when Diew gave birth to our daughter Mindy. She grew up at the lodge and attended the basic primary school in our village. At home, Mindy spoke Northern Thai and English. At school, she spoke Shan and learnt Central Thai. She had a happy childhood, but her life contrasted with that of her Thai and Australian cousins. Growing up in a small Shan village meant that Mindy missed basic city comforts like refrigerators, television, telephones, shopping malls and movie theatres, but she thrived in a village full of friends who swam together in the creek and played in the fields. People from dozens of countries stayed at the lodge, and Mindy talked with them every day.

Diew's brother Wat and her sister Doi worked for us. We also employed Shan people from Ban Tham Lod. Our staff and our long-staying guests formed our extended family in the multi-ethnic enclave we called home.

Lotte, from Sweden, managed the lodge on my first visit to Australia in 10 years. She handled the assignment without any problems, apart from one small glitch when she flipped the rover into a rice paddy near Chiang Mai. A small dried fish, stuck between the windscreen and the registration sticker, reminded us of the accident for years.

# PUN PUN

In 1985 a twist of fate turned an Australian friend, Gary, into the manager of the bomb-shattered Pun Pun Guesthouse in Chiang Mai. Gary, like Paco and Dave, had joined some of our hill tribe trekking tours. I liked his gentle manners, sincerity, dependable nature and unimposing friendship. Over time, he succumbed to the compelling appeal of Thailand and its attractive people, and became a regular visitor.

Gary was not an overtly handsome man, but his pleasant personality and easygoing attitude charmed women. He was preparing to fly back home after one trip when he met a beautiful young Thai nurse from Chiang Mai. After a few hours of platonic flirtation, they agreed Gary would earn money in Australia and return for their wedding. He worked for months and forwarded thousands of dollars for their future life together.

When Gary returned to Chiang Mai, his 'fiancé' met him at the airport but then left to work in a distant rural clinic. She told Gary not to look for her. He later heard she had spent part of his money on a new motorbike and a double bed she shared with her Thai boyfriend. The jilted Australian tracked down her family. Ashamed at the brazen swindle and sorry for his plight, the nurse's sister retrieved the majority of the money and returned it to Gary.

The manager of Pun Pun Guesthouse, where Gary stayed, introduced himself as Sid. When I first met Sid, I saw a man of small stature with beady eyes that lazed in thin slashes cut into his flat pasty face. I knew the glazy look. I had lived with shrunken eyes and sun-deprived complexions for seven years.

Sid was different from other Thai heroin addicts I knew. He smiled a lot and used his good command of English to expound a quirky and endearing philosophical outlook on life. I liked him, but suspected that the smooth talk and outgoing friendliness masked a slick con artist.



Junkies deceive themselves, their friends, their relatives and anyone else they can rip off while they avoid the reality of their demise.

Since the nurse fiasco, Gary's gullible inclinations had concerned me. If Sid made any offers or deals, I warned, he should treat them with suspicion and scepticism. I was too late. Gary told me he had already lent him 3,000 baht, and Sid had returned the money, with interest. I cautioned him against extending any more loans.

Two weeks later, Gary admitted that he had given Sid another 30,000 baht, and he was waiting for him to return the money. Meanwhile, Gary had met two Swiss tourists staying at the guesthouse who had also lent money to Sid. They waited another week before contacting the police. Sid conceded he couldn't pay them back, but made an offer. If Gary gave him more money, to pay back the Swiss, he could have the lease of the guesthouse.

As the new manager, Gary threw his heart and energy into the place, and Pun Pun's popularity blossomed. He advertised for help. Pat, a divorced northern woman a bit older than Gary, applied for the job. She was an excellent cook and housekeeper, but I suspected she planned to do more than just work for the gentle 'Mister Gally'.

I warned him, 'Mate, be careful, she's probably got kids and is looking for a new husband'. 'Don't sleep with her', was the essential parting advice I gave to my friend. In his last relationship with the nurse, he had wanted to get married after a conversation in broken English that had lasted a few hours.

Pat moved into the manager's room. The next time I met Gary, they ran the place together. He soon learnt that her 'two children' had grown to four. She also told him her ex-husband had shot her, and several operations to remove the bullets and repair the damage had left her with shortened intestines.

While Gary's relationship with Pat was developing, Sid decided to drive them out and reclaim the guesthouse. Pat turned out to be a caring person and a devoted partner. No one else, especially Sid, was going to screw her future husband.

We stayed in Pun Pun on trips to Chiang Mai and Gary travelled to Pang Mapha whenever he could. He craved adventure, and I supplied it in unlimited quantities.

At Cave Lodge, I was experimenting with new activities for my guests. With my encouragement, Gary volunteered to ride an inner tube through Tham Lod for the first time ever and then descend the Nam Lang a further six kilometres. The river flowed high with wet season run-off and the trip sounded dicey, but Gary liked taking risks. I set him up with the tube, a motorcycle helmet and a torch for the cave and told him I'd meet him at a bridge near Soppong.

When Gary failed to show, hours after our appointed time, I drove back to the lodge to organise a search party. Gary walked back alone at sunset with cuts and bruises on his body. The river had stripped the shoes off his feet and swept him into rocks and trees. He said he had nearly drowned more than once.

Gary was the first of many people, including me, who took unnecessary risks and endangered their lives in pursuit of a unique adventure in Pang Mapha. Some were less fortunate than Gary and lost more than their shoes.

# PARALYSIS

Our initial forays into Tham Nam Lang in 1984 had inspired John Dunkley to organise groups of Australian cavers to help us survey the rest of the cave and document other unexplored systems in Pang Mapha. I scouted the area for more promising entrances and wrote to him about the immense potential of Tham Susa. I agreed to arrange the logistic support for the larger groups of cavers and transport them in my Land Rover. The newly constructed Cave Lodge would be our base camp.

In April 1985 I guided Dunkley's expedition members to Tham Nam Lang. Kerry Hamilton, a particularly fit and passionate Canberra caver, joined the first group to push into the unexplored section of the river tunnel. Kerry's team paddled upstream in an inflatable raft, while the rest of us waited on the underground beach John and I had reached the previous year. They extended the known cave to a bypass passage more than five kilometres from the entrance and found an upper-level extension more beautiful than anything they had seen in a decade of caving in Australia.

We moved our camp to Tham Susa and three cavers, including Kerry, paddled their raft upstream until a thundering five-metre-high waterfall blocked the passage. Kerry climbed in the spray on the side of the falls and, halfway up the slippery face, his head torch beamed on an extraordinary creature clinging to the black rock. A tiny pink aquatic animal clambered, gecko-style, in and out of the pounding water. It waddled up the waterfall using four fins that protruded from its sides like splayed feet.

Kerry lacked any collection container or pockets in his clothing, so he popped the live animal, the size of his little finger, into his mouth. He planned to preserve it in alcohol back at our camp outside the cave.



This wedge-headed, eyeless, waterfall-climbing cavefish had no scales and no body pigment. Scientists in Australia and Switzerland later examined the holotype Kerry had collected and identified it as a new species of the genus *Homoloptera*. Years later experts studied more specimens and declared the fish a new genus endemic to Pang Mapha. They named it *Cryptotora thamicola*. David Attenborough would later describe the fish Kerry discovered as one of the most remarkable animals on our planet.

We returned to the lodge for a night and then set out for Nam Bor Pi, the Spirit Well. The limestone walls of this well-shaped pit drop 100 vertical metres into the earth. The hole is as wide as it is deep and a lush evergreen forest with 40-metre-high trees flourishes in its base. No human had ever touched the base of the Spirit Well.

The Black Lahu in Ban Louk Kaow Lahm, the closest village, told me that spiritual rather than natural forces had formed the gaping cavity. The villagers entertained no desire to reach the bottom, even if they could.

Ban Louk Kaow Lahm means 'Children of Rice Bamboo Village'. The path to Nam Bor Pi wound uphill from the village through groves of this common variety of bamboo. On higher slopes south of the village, we passed fields of dried poppy plants and munched on handfuls of the tasty seeds. Limestone outcrops bordered the field clearings and stands of intact forest sprouted on patches of earth between the exposed rocks.

The hot, dry season in northern Thailand peaks in April. All the deciduous trees near Nam Bor Pi had shed their leaves and forest fires had charred the parched undergrowth. Bare trunks rose from a blackened earth, and smoke from the smouldering forest floor hazed the hills and stung our eyes. The air was blistering, and sweat drenched our clothing and the pads of our heavy backpacks.

Intense midday heat baked the rock walls of Nam Bor Pi on the day of the first descent. John Taylor, one of the group, and Kerry abseiled on a caving rope down a 90-metre face into the stifling dry furnace. They stopped halfway to admire the view, and roasted like chickens in an oversized tandoori oven.

Off rope, the explorers circled the base of the cliff and crossed the untouched forest. We

watched them walk under a 100-metre-high cave in the northern wall and gaze up at the sky through the well's ring of rock. From the top, they looked no bigger than a couple of ants.

Aeons ago, the aggressive waters of the Nam Lang had created the cave inside Nam Bor Pi and the higher-level passages in Tham Nam Lang. The river may have changed course after a section of the cave roof collapsed and opened the karst window that Kerry and John were exploring. The river now snaked through the mountain at a deeper level, less than a kilometre south of the well.

The two cavers searched for a hole in the centre of Nam Bor Pi where wet season run-off could drain. They then climbed high inside the cave in the northern wall. If they could discover a connection with the higher caverns in Tham Nam Lang, it would make an outstanding through trip.

After failing to find any extensions, they started the long ascent of the hot cliff, one at a time. The other cavers and I watched them for a couple of hours from the rim of the well until the afternoon heat drove us to seek shelter in Tham Seu Dao (Leopard Cave), a cool, moist cave that sinks into the earth from the base of an accessible depression, a hundred metres south of the well. We named the cave after patches of gold-coloured concretions, reminiscent of leopard spots, that speckle a white ceiling in an inner chamber.

Back at the lodge, we celebrated the successful exploration of Nam Bor Pi with lots of food and beer. Around midnight, the Australians bedded down on the floor of our main house, next to my bedroom. During the night, an unusual noise awakened me. I stepped into the adjoining room and shone my torch on a row of sleeping cavers. Kerry lay awake, and was thumping his left leg on the bamboo floor. He looked at me, and I noticed the excessive white of extreme alarm in his eyes. Terror, or maybe a physical anomaly, had twisted his face and warped his mouth. Invisible bindings were preventing him from speaking or doing anything apart from writhing and stamping his leg. I woke the others.

Something had paralysed the right-hand side of Kerry's body. We suspected severe dehydration may have thickened his blood and clogged a vein in his brain. Kerry had forgotten to take a water bottle on his descent into Nam Bor Pi, and litres of sweat had

drained out of him on the long climb out. Back at the lodge, he had drunk more beer than water, which would have further aggravated his condition. I dissolved sugar and salt in warm water – the same solution that had saved the life of Ja Te – and we poured 15 glasses of the mix into his contorted mouth.

At daybreak, the Land Rover made one of its first ambulance runs to Pai, where the doctor diagnosed cerebral thrombosis. A blood clot had blocked the flow of blood to a part of Kerry's brain.

John Dunkley recounted the episode in a 1985 edition of *Australian Caver*:

'Next day, another 4 hours and 4,000 bends to Chiang Mai and a good hospital. Six days of anguish, telephone calls, putting on the hard word, and despair in all before Kerry was delivered to an ambulance at Brisbane Airport. Exacerbated by dehydration and fatigue, something as serious as thrombosis is unlikely on a remote area expedition, but the possibility of evacuation has to be allowed for in planning...how we'd have got by without John Spies and Diu Intikat and their Land Rover, I just don't know... Of course, the Lahu and even the Thais would say that in assaulting Nam Bor Pi, we incurred the displeasure of phi (spirit) of the cave. In particular, we may have offended Kwan, the spirit in the head responsible for health, wealth and general comfort. Kwan has attacked Kerry. Personally, I think Kwan lives in the newly discovered upper levels of Tham Nam Lang.'

Nam Bor Pi had struck, and the Black Lahu expressed little surprise. Their understanding of spiritual places cautioned them that when people cross the boundaries and tempt fate, they suffer the consequences. Rumours abounded, and a paralysed farang soon deteriorated into a perished one. I hoped the distorted version of Kerry's accident would reinforce the local animists' beliefs in the well's origins.

Spirits didn't bother me. I wanted to push my luck and spend a night inside the sacred hole, something no one had done before. When my vertical caving skills improved, I planned a descent with Peter and Phil, two English friends. I had another motive to drop into the well and have a good look. Japanese soldiers had unloaded the crates from the worn out elephants on a mountain crest not far from Nam Bor Pi. I had climbed down the steep embankment



of the original road at this point to the rusted remains of a vehicle from the 1940s. The local Lahu told me that a group of Japanese had been walking in the area earlier that year, looking for sinkholes. Maybe there was a connection.

Peter, the first to descend, secured two bolts in protrusions on the cliff face where the sharp limestone could abrade and sever our nylon ropes. He tied separate ropes above and below each bolt. From the bottom, he called 'off rope' and I backed over the rim. I had never abseiled such a long distance or crossed a bolt. When I reached the first one, I clipped an ascender onto the top rope. I attached it too high and couldn't move my descender to the lower rope. It took me 40 minutes to complete the basic manoeuvre.

While I was dangling 50 metres above the treetops, trying to cross the bolt, a group of Lahu boys started tossing big rocks into the well and hooting when they exploded on impact. I had believed the hole's reputation for taking life would have enhanced the locals' apprehension and discouraged them from annoying the well's spirits, but it seemed I was wrong.

The acoustics in the well amplify the slightest sounds and the rocks smashing into the base blasted apart like dynamite in a mineshaft. I hung on the opposite wall from the boys, but the noise was unravelling my confidence. I shouted in Lahu, 'Dtah teh, nga gau nah'. 'Don't do it, I am scared.'

We set up our camp in the centre of the well under an overhanging boulder, big enough to protect us from raining rocks. The lush greenery surrounding us contrasted with the burnt deciduous forest on the hills outside the hole. I built a small fire to cook our dinner and felt a tinge of guilt. We had invaded a physically isolated ecosystem, a sanctuary where some life forms might have evolved separately or escaped extinction, and I was lighting the first fire.

Early next morning we stood under the well's enormous cave and watched, awestruck, as a thick wave of fog folded over the circular rim and poured down the sheer walls. The sinking fog evoked a surreal, primeval atmosphere, and I half expected a pterodactyl to swoop out of the cave behind me and glide up into the descending miasma.

I spent the morning searching the forest floor and the cliff line, but found no artefacts from heavy crates. The only thing we collected was the skeleton of a monkey that had probably lost

its grip while clambering down the cliff to gather ripe fruit.

We had tied our rope onto trees near the lip of the well but had left nobody to protect our lifeline. Thailand, I had convinced myself, was not Mexico, where vertical cavers have looked up to the flash of a knife and a grinning local who says, 'Hey gringo, send up your money or I cut zee rope'. I trusted the Lahu – they wouldn't slice our rope or ever consider extorting money.

The ascent took an hour. Exhausted, I stepped out of Nam Bor Pi first. Two Lahu boys, holding big machetes, sat on the edge of the hole near our rope. A Shan opium addict smoking a cheroot squatted nearby. He probably worked for a Lahu family, weeding their poppy fields for a smidgen of opium every day. We grinned at each other and I thought, 'Thailand is a wonderful country'.

The addict said, in Shan, 'Ahh, kha duay soo ben bot wun. Bun kha ben lahn, kha goh bo hut long', which meant, 'I have watched you for part of the day. I wouldn't go down there for a million baht.' I smiled at the boost the wasted witness to our daring exploit gave to my ego, but I didn't believe him. He would climb into the well on bamboo poles for a kilo of opium. He asked me about the farang who had died in the well. I explained, as I have many times since Kerry Hamilton's accident, that merely half of the farang had died. He shuddered and took a deep draw on his cheroot.

Kerry was an enthusiastic caver who stretched the limits of his endurance. He had the muscle and commitment to pull the team forward. I remember Kerry swimming ahead with a rope clenched in his teeth in Tham Nam Lang and free-climbing underground walls while we watched in admiration. Partial paralysis was not going to stop him caving.

Kerry's first concern, while he lay in his hospital bed in Chiang Mai, was his manhood. He told me of his relief when he confirmed the loss of his right side had not affected the centre. He worked hard on his rehabilitation, and within a year he had regained 90 per cent of his movement. Kerry wrote to me and confirmed that he would soon return to Thailand to finish what he had started.

# ALL THE WAY

The Australian cavers came back to Pang Mapha almost every year. On our first major expedition in 1985 we had explored 20 uncharted caves during a two-week period, including Tham Susa and Nam Bor Pi, and mapped more than 20 kilometres of new passage. John Dunkley examined the survey results of Tham Nam Lang and declared that it ranked as one of the most voluminous caves in the world. I shared longer and harder journeys with these dedicated fanatics, and my infatuation intensified. On multi-week trips, conversation revolved around little else than caves and caving. I called them maniacs, but I listened and learnt a lot.

In 1986 I joined three cavers on the first attempt to reach the end of Tham Nam Lang. At our base camp near the resurgence, we crammed enough supplies and equipment for four days underground into backpacks. Our heavy gear weighed us down as we clambered across mounds of rockfall and fought the swift current. In places where the walls narrowed and we couldn't swim against the flow, Atilla Vrana, the strongest man in our group, donned flippers and swam with a rope until the channel widened. He then hauled the rest of us upstream on an inflatable raft.

On the first day, Dorothy Nichterlein, the lone female on our expedition, tripped when crossing boulders and fractured a few ribs. She said she could stand the pain and insisted on continuing. Soon after Dorothy's accident, a sharp underwater rock gashed a deep cut in my leg, and the wound bled profusely. Like Dorothy, I had psyched myself for this epic trip into the unknown – inside one of the biggest river tunnels in the world – and nothing short of an incapacitated caver would force a retreat.

At the end of the day we reached a cramped and damp bypass cavern and bedded down for



a rough night. Members of our 1985 expedition had ended their initial push at this point, five kilometres from the entrance.

The next day we carried our lights, spare batteries, survey gear, water and lunch. We hoped to reach the extremities of the system, or find a way to the outside, on a day trip from our bypass camp.

The river tunnel ended four hours upstream in a massive pile of slabs that filled half the cavern. The Nam Lang roared out of slots at the base of the pile. We climbed over and under the shattered rock that had once formed part of the cave roof. We wriggled in tight cavities and edged between house-sized chunks of limestone. The encasing rock amplified the sounds of packs and boots scraping over stone and our grunts of exertion. Atilla crawled ahead of me, and the stench of his saturated clothes and grimy sweat filled the constricted spaces. I trusted geological time had stabilised the blocks above us, but the grumble of the Nam Lang as it gnawed through the base of the pile reminded me that the cave remained active and dangerous.

On the other side of the breakdown passage we stood in a room broader than a football field. We could no longer hear the river. Water dripped 30 metres from the ceiling, and the loud splats of droplets hitting the floor interrupted the stony silence.

The rocks gave off a musty, old smell. The coral and marine life that formed the limestone had been in the dark for over 200 million years. I knew unnamed microbes were digesting the minerals and supporting unknown species of tiny troglobitic life, but the place looked dead, fossilised.

The cracked floor was a minefield of loose rocks, which could shift under our weight and collapse deeper into the pile. We trod gingerly as we moved towards the far side of the cavern.

Dorothy's bruised chest ached, and blood still oozed from my leg wound. The two of us gave up halfway across. Coercing our injured and exhausted bodies further into this volatile part of the cave invited disaster. We had reached a dangerous place, two days tough caving away from outside help, and we carried nothing we could fashion into a stretcher. A self-rescue of a debilitated caver in the boulder field would be impossible. Besides, we needed to save energy

for the gruelling return trip. We had been caving all day and knew the stream passage would deplete whatever reserves we had left.

Atila and John Taylor, both tough cavers, carried on while Dorothy and I rested. They measured the last metres of Tham Nam Lang to a water-filled sump, eight kilometres from the entrance. After they rejoined us, Atila attempted to climb a fractured wall and search for a way to bypass the sump. It was the last straw for me. I started screaming at him, insisting he come down – the walking wounded couldn't deal with another accident this far in. 'Bloody maniac', I grumbled under my breath.

Facing the other way, our new perspective from the inner side of the breakdown bewildered us. We couldn't find the cairns we had made to mark the route. The small stacks of stones normally stand out against the haphazard natural jumble of broken roof rock on a cave floor.

Our lights sucked into the remaining batteries as we searched for our markers. We crawled back inside the boulder pile, and I heard the rumble of the Nam Lang, louder and more ominous than before. I knew we had entered the mound in the wrong place. So did Atila – he was dropping down gaps between rocks, trying to find an alternative route to the river level. I didn't follow him. The last place I wanted to be was in the Nam Lang, lost in a three-dimensional maze underneath a massive unstable heap of collapsed cave, with a gung-ho extremist.

We regrouped in the big room and moved south from the northern wall of the chamber. Nobody talked of failure. Cavers with flat batteries survive at a rate somewhere between people crossing deserts with empty water bottles and skydivers without parachutes. We checked every hole and, in less than an hour, found the first cairn and retraced our route.

Back in the river, I felt relieved to be in familiar territory. We floated wherever possible and allowed the current to work for us.

We reached our camp and collapsed in a sodden heap. The physical and mental exertion had numbed our bodies and our minds. We cooked a hot meal on a kerosene stove, and the fumes and steam from chicken soup infused the cave mist. The food warmed us and replenished some of our energy, but no one felt like talking.

Perpetual darkness distorts a caver's conception of time. People deep inside the earth without a watch lose track of time, and days can warp into endless nights. To maintain our body rhythms, and a grasp on external reality, we ate at watch-ruled times. Our candles burned down, and we tried to sleep.

I lay back on cold stone. My damp clothes reeked of stale sweat and river water. Drips splattered in pools and sounded like clucking tongues. A constant babble of feminine-sounding voices echoed in the river tunnel. I usually ignore the Siren-like gibberish that emanates from subterranean rivers, but that night I lay awake for hours imagining words.

Sounds in caves can be deceptive. On an earlier trip in Tham Nam Lang I had heard a crash of falling rocks and indistinct shouting, which I interpreted as distress calls. Minutes passed before my friends rounded a corner, and I realised that everyone was safe. Since that initial scare, I pay no attention to what I think fellow cavers are saying until they are standing next to me. Even laughter echoing in a large cavern can come across as an anguished plea for help or, if you let your imagination run wild, haunting cackles.

The next day, on the way out of the cave, we made a detour to the upper-level cavern that Kerry Hamilton's team had discovered on the previous year's expedition. We ascended the 40-metre-high wall one at a time to avoid any loosened rocks from higher climbers. Dorothy's injury prevented her from climbing, and she waited by the river with a lit candle for company.

I climbed last and watched the candle flame diminish to a pinprick of light. At one point, as I clung to a formation high on the wall, I flashed back to my first wild caving experience in Tham Lod. Once again, I was climbing off rope and unprotected on an unstable rock face. If I lost my grip, or if the rock supporting my weight broke free, I could end up as fish food.

I rejoined John and Atilla on top and we walked into a corridor floored with cracked white stones. Pristine formations draped from the vaulted ceilings and plastered the walls of the ancient cavern. The cave opened up into a chamber hundreds of metres wide, with 30-metre-tall columns standing as majestic pillars. Stalagmites, resembling uneven stacks of melted ceramic plates, rose from glistening orange platforms. Crystalline creations coated the walls, and lustrous oolites, like oyster pearls, filled shallow pools of transparent cave water on the



sparkling flowstone floor.

The splendour of the calcifications encrusting the upper level climaxed our arduous journey in search of the end of Tham Nam Lang. The vibrant colours and fragile formations contrasted with the smashed grey slabs we had scrambled under in the terminal section of the cave. The sight of these exceptional natural treasures, more precious than plundered gold, was ample reward for all our hard work. I was beginning to understand what motivated Atilla to risk his life so deep under the earth.

I could have spent another day marvelling at the wonders in the higher cavern, and putting off the descent of the precipitous wall, but we couldn't leave Dorothy alone for too long. Something else was worrying me as well. My wet trousers had chafed the skin off my inner thighs, and every movement scraped hard cloth against raw flesh. I hurt and I hobbled, and I'd had enough.

The first faint hint of daylight appeared 300 metres from the cave entrance. We limped towards the late afternoon light, impatient to end the ordeal. The dull grey radiance strengthened, and the protruding shapes on the walls formed soft silhouettes. Colours materialised, and we switched off our torches.

As we climbed out of the entrance chamber, a cacophony of bird calls, chirping crickets and the shrill buzz of cicadas resonated in my head, louder than I remembered. An intense fragrance of decomposing leaves and fresh wild flowers assaulted my nostrils. After 54 hours in total darkness, removed from the familiar sounds and smells of the forest, I was returning to an uncommonly vivid and sensual world.

People have said the best part of caving is getting out. Masochists reckon the deprivations and trying conditions they subject themselves to guarantees that when they exit a cave, the outside world is not such a dismal place anymore. This delusion implies that increased suffering underground results in more pleasurable sensations on the outside.

I put on a pair of dry, baggy Lahu pants and sat by the campfire with our friends who had waited near the entrance for our safe return. Mekhong whisky, mixed with cave water, had never tasted better.

I regretted that Dorothy had missed seeing the cave riches with us. Back in Australia, her broken ribs healed, but she succumbed to melanoma before she could return to Tham Nam Lang.

# TROGLOBITES

In 1983 John Dunkley and I walked to Ban Mae Lana, a Shan village, to inspect a stream sink. We could find the point where the Nam Mae Lana poured into impenetrable holes on detailed contour maps, but the water then vanished, at least on paper. Over the next three years I searched for the place where the stream reappeared.

One day in January 1986 I met a Black Lahu man who said he had caught fish where the Nam Mae Lana resurfaced. He claimed he had seen a small hole in the cliff above the emerging stream and had heard water inside. People, he said, dared not go in.

I assembled a group of guests from Cave Lodge to join me on an exploratory jaunt, and hired the Lahu informant. He guided us into an area of craggy limestone about five kilometres west of the sink, and then chopped a path through tangled jungle from the resurgence to a cliff face.

We stared into a small black aperture and listened to the sound of the underground stream. Our guide told me that his brother had shot and wounded a big black bear near this spot about a week ago. The bear, he said, had fled into the hole, and didn't come out. His brother hadn't gone in after it. I translated what our guide said for my guests. I had promised them something different when they paid me to join this trip.

We rested for a moment, and I thought of other bear stories Lahu had related to me. Villagers in Ban Huai Hea said they encountered them in their cornfields at harvest time. One man said agitated bears try to paw your face off and rip out your eyes. Avoid looking at them, he advised. Another man insisted that the best way to evade an attack is to lie face down and pretend to be dead. Someone else spoke of a female bear with cubs that clawed a woman's breast off. A hunter told me about a wounded and cornered bear his friend had shot



with a rifle. It wouldn't stop attacking them until he emptied the magazine from his carbine. He said pellets or lead balls from muzzle-loaders couldn't pierce a bear's thick coat.

I have seen simple bear traps near Lisu and Lahu cornfields. The farmers build a sturdy cage with split logs and bind heavy stones onto a lid. They prop the lid open with a stick that rests on a flat board covered with corn. When a bear climbs into the cage to eat the bait, it trips the stick and the lid slams shut. The farmers then shoot it at close range.

I pitied the bears and all the other animals approaching local extinction in our district. The hill tribes embraced an attitude similar to the Australian colonial settlers: 'If it moves, shoot it. If it doesn't move, chop it down.'

I had been searching for a way into the underground course of the Nam Mae Lana for years. The last-minute threat of a hungry, wounded and cornered bear wasn't going to stop me. I figured that if the gunshot hadn't killed the bear, it would have exited the cave by now. Besides, if all of us went in, the odds of the bear mauling me would decrease. I resisted telling the group the bear attack stories; I didn't want to scare anyone off and lower my chances. I told them tourists arrived every day – there was an inexhaustible supply of new ones – but the opportunity to explore a virgin cave was too rare for me to resist. I also mentioned 'safety in numbers'. 'That's reassuring', one of them quipped. 'Look guys', I said, 'you can wait outside if you like, but if a freaked-out, wounded bear claws its way out of this hole, then you are on your own'.

Apart from bears, tigers once slept in cave entrances. Snakes, spiders and malicious spirits also like to hang out on the edge of the underworld. 'Hago gau ja ja. Nga mah gai', our guide said in Lahu. 'Caves are scary. I'm not going.' He sat down to prepare a quid of betel and ram gunpowder into the muzzle of his rifle.

A tingle of trepidation tempered my excitement as I squeezed into the hole. My group of novice cavers followed, talking and laughing to cover their unease. The entrance hole opened up into a tunnel, 10 metres high and wide. Our fear of attack in a bear-sized room dissipated, and we waded upstream. I looked for wet rocks after crossings, and everyone listened for sounds other than the river.

Four hundred metres inside the cave, a distinct sound of frantic splashing made us flinch with fright. It sounded as if a large animal was fording the stream and loping towards us from deeper inside the cave.

We scrambled onto a higher ledge and crouched behind small formations. The babbling of the river in the tunnel muffled the sound of our panting. We didn't move for minutes. We debated, in whispers, whether to flee with our lights on or sit still in the dark. Trying to sound like I knew what I was talking about, I told the group that if the bear attacked they should lie face down and pretend to be dead.

I waited until the splashing noise subsided and then climbed down to the river and crept along the bank. I rounded a corner and inched upstream in shin-deep water. My torch beam illuminated swooping bats in an otherwise empty tunnel.

A loud splash behind me made me jump. Something struck my leg. I shrieked 'Fuck!' Nobody raced to the rescue – maybe those I had left in the dark and around the bend were lying face down, pretending to be dead.

When I realised what had startled me, I whooped with relief. Our intrusion had frightened big fish, and their backs and fins thrashed on the surface as they swam in shallow sections against the current. I shouted to the others, 'It's safe guys; the bear's dead'.

Four months later, I set up a camp for John Dunkley's Australian cavers near the outflow of Tham Mae Lana. I had named the cave after the stream that traversed it. Every morning, small teams went inside to survey new passage and take photographs. By the fifth day, we had pushed in five kilometres to Red Crystal Stream, the limit of feasible exploration on a full day of caving.

One afternoon I accompanied a couple of our Shan porters on a bombing trip inside the cave. Hill tribe men use a single percussion cap to ignite the gunpowder in their rifles. The Shan carried three sealed plastic bags that held 200 caps each. On the way to the cave they chopped some bamboo and stuffed each bag into a short tube. They then fitted long lengths inside the short ones and made sure they were watertight.

Inside the cave, the men waited until they saw fish in a pool and then rammed the bamboo

down hard onto an underwater rock. The caps and bamboo exploded in a deafening blast, and the fish within a small radius floated belly up.

Two cavers, returning from deep exploration, were unaware of this fishing technique. They happened to be upstream from bear-scare corner when the first bomb went off. The roar of the blast and rumbling echo in the tunnel stopped them in their tracks. The cavers then heard rowdy shouting and splashing, as the Shan jumped into the pool to grab their dazed catch.

Caught up in the excitement of the bombing, I didn't see the cavers round the corner. When I noticed their lights, I spun around to face them. Their bleached expressions startled me. They told me that the sounds had convinced them a collapse had trapped or injured people and blocked the way out of the cave. Back at camp, I asked the porters to stick to more caver and eco-friendly fishing methods.

A week later our expedition members found another entrance and a way through the system. Eventually, we mapped more than 12 kilometres of passage, which made Tham Mae Lana the longest known cave in mainland Southeast Asia. Since 1990, cavers have found longer systems, but I was particularly proud of my part in the discovery and exploration of this outstanding cave.

A year after the first through trip in 1986, I started leading arduous two-day and three-day tours into the cave with groups of guests from the lodge. We crossed kilometre-long rooms half-filled with shattered cave roof, swam in deep pools, scrambled over thousands of boulders and slept on a broad beach, set near a lake, five kilometres from the entrance.

The people I took on these early trips helped me explore new extensions, and together we added four kilometres to the original surveys.

The group said they felt as if they had entered an alien world – a place impossible to visualise unless you see it, and hard to describe once you have. Spending a night or two in the cave enhanced the separate reality experience. Stunning speleothems, rivalling the finest examples in the world's prettiest caves, decorated the new passages we explored. Many people described the tour as their best travel adventure, and the most amazing thing they had ever done.

On one overnight trip with a group from the lodge, I spotted a small waterfall cascading



from a higher level. A few people joined me after dinner to search for its origin. We climbed the waterfall to reach a tributary stream, which we discovered harboured hundreds of small eyeless white fish in shallow pools. I recognised them as *Shistura oedipus*, another newly named cavefish endemic to Pang Mapha. I had seen the same species in Tham Nam Lang and several other caves. One kilometre further in, the stream dropped from a high vertical waterfall, and we made an astonishing discovery. Two tiny rare *Cryptotora* hugged the smooth rocks. We watched the exquisite pink critters waddle in and out of the water and climb overhanging sections with the ease of Chingchok lizards on a ceiling.

Nearby, we climbed to a higher dry section and slid on our bellies into a superb cavern, unlike anything I had seen before. Spiky clusters of the mineral aragonite encrusted the ceilings and walls of five rooms. The extraordinary crystal growths ranged in colour from ice-clear to rich orange. We spent hours marvelling at delicate sprays of needles and translucent formations, some more than a metre long. A blood-red stalactite, the shape and size of a human heart, adorned the final cavern. Dave said it looked like an extra large strawberry, but I knew we had found the heart of this unique cave.

Aragonite forms with the same composition as calcite, the common mineral in caves, but the crystal structure is different. In Pang Mapha, aragonite crystals grow in a few places where limestone bedrock meets a layer of shale. The minerals, or microbes, in the shale appear to influence the calcite crystallisation process.

I have revisited the crystal caverns with trusted friends five times since my first visit. No other cave in Southeast Asia contains such striking and fragile stalactites, and I dare not pinpoint their location on a cave map. I am certain the formations are still there, in their original condition.

The *Cryptotora* colony the lodge guests and I sighted on the waterfall shared their stream with hundreds of *Shistura*. Very few caves in the world support two genera of troglobitic fish in the same waterway. The rarity of our find delighted me and boosted my interest in the evolution of these endangered cavefish.

Since that fortuitous discovery, I have detected the two species sharing another stream

inside the same system. I have also recorded *Shistura* in separate colonies in eight other caves in Pang Mapha.

News of the two new species of cavefish in northern Thailand leaked out, and Thai and foreign experts contacted me. Tyson Roberts, an American ichthyologist who conducted taxonomy studies on both species, described *Cryptotora* as the most specialised subterranean fish on our planet, in terms of its specific adaptation to a cave waterfall environment.

Richard Borowsky from New York extracted *Cryptotora* DNA and established that the fish in Tham Susa and Tham Mae Lana are almost identical. This surprising result raised questions in my mind about conventional wisdom on the distribution of troglobitic species.

Over thousands of generations, the natural selection of mutations that enhance a creature's ability to survive in a particular environment can convert surface-dwelling fish into a new species of troglobite. Most experts believe a troglobite cannot live outside its specific ecosystem and deliberately never leaves its cave. The convergent DNA readings for the *Cryptotora* in the two isolated cave systems implied that there might be exceptions to this common assumption.

Both cave streams drain into the Nam Khong, a tributary of the Mae Nam Pai, which flows into the Salween River in Burma. Millions of years have elapsed since their waters shared the same underground passages. This geological time span should have resulted in a greater divergence in the DNA of the fish.

Could the fish be relics from millions of years ago? Had an almost identical environment in the two separate caves preserved their distinctive DNA for countless millennia? Or are the *Cryptotora* an example of parallel evolution from a distant common ancestor?

Another explanation could be that they do venture outside and breed with the fish from the other cave. If so, then a likely time would be the wet season when flood surges could flush the fish out of the cave.

The zero visibility in a flooded river would lessen the threats to the sightless fish from predators on the surface. The outside fish are also more prone to eye irritation and damage in murky water than eyeless cavefish. Enhanced non-visual abilities could further improve the

troglobites' chances away from their evolutionary niche.

From my quasi-scientific perspective, I understand that evolutionary adaptations follow a logical path. Why would troglobitic fish, living in a subterranean stream that flows to the outside, lose their ability to leave a cave? Racer snakes, bats, cockroaches and many other creatures can live in both worlds. Maybe predators or human activity had never threatened the fish, and they had never needed to escape.

Kerry Hamilton had discovered a new genus with mysterious origins and an uncertain future. Lisu, Lahu and Shan farmers have cleared much of the forest cover on the catchment areas of the two caves. But while people have farmed the same fields for thousands of years and the fish have survived, the traditional farmers didn't use pesticides and fertilizer and live in DDT-coated houses.



# SATISFACTION

**T**wenty metres upstream from the waterfall where Kerry Hamilton had discovered *Cryptotora*, the Nam Susa plunges seven metres from a higher hole into a deep pool of seething foam. Exploration in Tham Susa had floundered at the base of this thundering second waterfall.

Three days after discovering the cavefish, Kerry lay in a hospital bed, uncertain whether he would be capable of entering another cave, or a woman, again. Throughout his long convalescence, the unclimbed waterfall in Tham Susa consumed his thoughts, and his fixation developed into an obsession. If he could recover from partial paralysis, then he could surmount the physical barrier that had defeated him and the rest of the cavers in Tham Susa.

Once he had regained his strength, Kerry returned to Cave Lodge and told me he was ready. I convinced a large group of guests, none of whom had any previous caving experience, to help him conquer the falls. We trekked down the Nam Khong and camped on the riverbank opposite long terraces of travertine that the cave stream had redeposited. The dissolved limestone had precipitated in thick layers from the agitated cave water when it plunged over the Susa Falls. High above the stepped cascades, a semicircle of cliffs defined the serrated edge of the Guet Sam Sip plateau.

Near the cave, I chopped down a long thin tree and nailed a dozen steps onto the trunk. Our group carried and floated the log ladder 600 metres up the cave passage to a set of rapids below the first waterfall. With great effort, we managed to prop the ladder against the face, but limited standing room on the top of the falls and low levels of oxygen in the cave air hindered our attempt to haul the log up to the deeper pool below the second waterfall. I felt disappointed that Kerry hadn't been able to achieve his goal, but he shrugged it off and said

he would try again another time.

Bad air is a major obstacle for cavers in Tham Susa. Near the waterfalls, the level of carbon dioxide in the cave is 100 times higher than in the air outside. The excessive carbon dioxide replaces part of the air's oxygen content, and any physical activity causes people to gasp. The good news, especially for future generations on earth, is that humans can survive in abnormally high levels of carbon dioxide.

A major contributor of carbon dioxide in caves is rotting vegetation that streams wash in from outside. The gas build-up is also due to speleothem formation processes; cave water discharges its dissolved carbon dioxide when limestone precipitates. The concentration in Tham Susa stabilises at a tolerable, but uncomfortable, level, with no discernible variations at different times of the day.

It wasn't until 1990 that a team of Australian cavers made the ascent of the inner waterfall a major goal for a better-equipped expedition. We all wanted Kerry to reap the honour of being the first person to climb it. Neil Anderson, the expedition leader, had brought a bolting kit to prepare a route up the falls, but he found that the rock face, a heavily weathered intrusion of volcanic basalt, crumbled when he tried to drill holes for the bolts. The only alternative way to climb the waterfall was to build a bamboo scaffold. We chopped 15 lengths from stands by the cave entrance and dragged them inside. The bad air turned the task of hauling the bamboo up the cave river and over the first falls into fatiguing work.

By the third day Kerry had wedged enough bamboo across the violent, sucking hydraulics of the six-metre-deep plunge pool to form a suspended platform. He jammed a long length into the base of the pool and bound it to the crosspieces. The upright pole, with Kerry's caving rope strapped to the top, rested against the upper lip of the waterfall. He clipped on and began his ascent.

We watched in admiration as the spirit-attack survivor stepped over the lip. He dragged the top end of the rope into the upper tunnel and moved out of sight. Kerry continued a few hundred metres upstream and found a rare showerhead stalactite that he named 'The Nichterlein', in memory of Dorothy. The passage continued but he didn't push it.

Kerry clipped back on rope at the top of the bamboo and descended. He hyperventilated in the thin air near the scaffolding for a few minutes, then shouted to us over the noise of the booming waterfall. He said he had anchored the rope in the upper passage. The upper tunnel had similar dimensions to the rest of the cave and the air still sucked.

Kerry lay back on a wet rock. The wind generated by the waterfall buffeted spray in his face. He looked at peace, and I understood his accomplishment had satisfied him and alleviated the anguish he had suffered since his stroke.

The next day four other cavers climbed the rope and surveyed 1.5 kilometres of river tunnel to a big breakdown room, where the river funnelled out of a submerged hole the size of a stormwater drain.

High on carbon dioxide and light deprivation, I proposed we strap a 'volunteer' onto a long piece of bamboo and thrust him against the current into the drain hole. If necessary, the team could add more lengths and extend the deep probe. The rest of the cavers shouldered their gear and headed for fresh air and daylight before anyone took the plan seriously.

Nobody else has climbed the second waterfall since 1990, and many more decades may pass before anyone tries again. The rope that Kerry tied off in the upper tunnel washed away years ago. I won't be holding my breath for the next attempt.



# SUFFOCATION

**B**ad air contaminates many caves in the region, sometimes in higher concentrations than in Tham Susa. Tham Huet stands out as one of these potential death traps. Huet means breathless, or hard to breathe, in Shan. The cave entrance is a sinkhole in the base of a limestone cliff, a few kilometres north of Ban Tham Lod.

French cavers explored Tham Huet for the first time in 1986. They followed a small underground stream for more than a kilometre until a boulder pile choked the passage. Deep inside, they observed a colony of *Shistura* in shallow pools. They also recorded high levels of carbon dioxide, but there was enough oxygen in the mix to enable them to spend a full day in the cave.

I invited friends staying at Cave Lodge to visit Tham Huet and view the cavefish. When a few other guests wanted to join the trip I agreed, but told them I had never been in the cave and impressed upon them that it had a reputation for bad air. The locals who named the cave said they had trouble breathing in the forest near the entrance and dared not go inside. I told the guests I wasn't leading a tour, and they joined me at their own risk. Funnily enough, I give the same disclaimer to people who actually pay me for a caving tour.

We squeezed into a small gap between boulders above the stream sink and noticed the cave was sucking air in. Flood debris covered the floor inside, and white mould coated the jumble of logs and leaves. I told everyone it looked like a perfect hideout for snakes. The change in smell from fresh forest to fungus made me hesitate. I could discern an elevated amount of carbon dioxide, but Tham Susa contained higher levels. I thought we could proceed deeper into the cave and not endanger ourselves. But I was wrong.

We squirmed through restrictions, crouched under low ceilings, and walked 600 metres

inside Tham Huet to reach the pools with *Shistura*. I wanted to photograph the fish, but one person in the group stepped in the stream and stirred up mud. We waited 10 minutes for the water to clear. My English friend Peter, who had spent a night with me in Nam Bor Pi, yawned and said his head was aching.

Differences in temperature or barometric pressure on the inside and outside of a cave can affect the movement of air underground. In the afternoon, the air from deeper inside tends to drift towards the entrance. I wetted a finger and held it up. The side facing the inner cavern felt cooler, which meant the heavier, carbon dioxide-laden air was moving out.

I use a butane lighter to check air quality in caves. The flame burns lower than normal in air containing less than 21 per cent oxygen – and a drop in oxygen usually corresponds with a rise in the level of carbon dioxide. When the carbon dioxide level reaches 2 per cent, the flame separates from the lighter and leaves a small translucent gap. If the amount of carbon dioxide rises, the gap increases in height. When the concentration thickens to 3 or 4 per cent, the lighter will not ignite. At this point, headaches and laboured breathing are common reactions. The situation deteriorates further when the carbon dioxide level climbs above 6 per cent, when people can die after a few minutes of exposure. Cavers caught in extreme levels of carbon dioxide need to run for their lives.

I leave a cave when a flame dies. When I flicked my lighter for the first time in Tham Huet it wouldn't ignite, and we were more than half a kilometre from good air.

Apparently, the human body can adjust to low levels of oxygen to a certain extent by producing extra red blood cells. Maybe sexual thrill seekers who cut off their air supply elevate their lust levels with pumped-up amounts of richer blood. The closest I've come to sticking my head in a plastic bag was caving in Tham Huet, and the experience of choking in abysmal air felt neither erotic nor pleasurable.

Everyone was drawing deep breaths. I snapped a few photographs of the fish. Our panting increased in tempo. We gulped the worsening air as fast as we could into our lungs, an involuntary response to excessive carbon dioxide. I set off, running upstream, for the 30-minute dash to the cave entrance. No one could talk – it was hard enough to breathe. I was

filling my lungs with bad air three times every second. I remembered that we had passed constricted squeezes that twisted and branched with unfamiliar multiple choices on the way in. The possibility of taking a wrong turn and leading the group to a dead end magnified the dazed confusion that was throbbing in my head.

The confined space of the cave tunnel amplified the frenzied wheezing and scurrying of the two people who scuttled right behind me. I couldn't see or hear the other three, let alone call out or wait for them. I powered forward on a surplus of adrenaline, unsure if I was taking the right forks.

I was drawing in what I feared were my last gasps when a faint glow of external light appeared ahead of me. For people light-headed on low oxygen and blinding faith, the light at the end of the tunnel could translate into a freaky religious delusion. As a confirmed sceptic, I envisaged the last glow in the tunnel of my life would emanate from the fizzling filaments of short-circuited brain cells. When I saw the light, the solitary thought inside my frazzled skull was that I would live. Memorable scenes were not going to flash past my eyes, and I was not going to die...at least not right then.

Outside, by the cave mouth, the foul wind gusted out of the hole and we still struggled to breathe. The three of us moved higher and collapsed on the forest floor. Flat on our backs, we gulped in the sweet forest air.

Peter was still in the cave with two others, but I felt very reluctant to go back in and look for them. The odds were stacked against me. If they were unconscious, I couldn't drag them out; if they were already dead, then I would die looking for them. I resolved to wait five more minutes before initiating a rescue attempt.

Ten minutes later I filled my lungs with good air and moved down to the stream. While I still could, I called out 'Peter!' into the sinkhole. I shouted again, and again. Only the low moan of the tainted wind escaping the restricted cave mouth broke the silence. The lack of response scared me, but I had to go back in. I procrastinated another minute.

I took a deep breath and lowered myself into the entrance squeeze. The cave wind whipped my hair and my headache kicked back in, harder than before. I began to pant. I couldn't think



of a worse way to die.

A minute after I re-entered Tham Huet, I heard the others. Peter crawled out first and, when he saw me, an expression of relief swept the fear from his eyes. We were both speechless, but managed to smile.

Cold beers back at the lodge helped us recover from the cave we all thought would kill us. We talked about unforeseen dangers and about how lucky we were to have escaped in time. The cave had contained no rare formations or any other redeeming features that could compensate for our close encounter, and my photos of the fish were out of focus and underexposed. I vowed never to go into Tham Huet again. But, when it comes to heeding my own advice, I'm a slow learner.

Tham Huet is part of a much larger system. If cavers could access the labyrinth via another entrance besides the hole we had almost died in, then it could be the longest cave in Thailand.

The cave stream flows out of a cleft in a limestone outcrop at Ban Nam Hoo (Water Hole Village), five kilometres south of the inflow. Ten metres inside the outflow cave, water fills the passage to the roof. I had looked for a way past the sump pool many times and scoured the hillside above the cave in search of a higher entrance.

In 2001, at the end of a particularly dry season, the stream stopped flowing and the sump drained for the first time in decades. I was working at the time with Thai academics on a cave database research project that was documenting hundreds of caves in Pang Mapha. I invited the more competent cavers on the project to help me investigate Tham Nam Hoo. We started the trip later in the morning than we had planned, which ended up saving our lives.

We slid on our bellies into the dry sump, which reminded me of an S bend in a western toilet. The stupidity of crawling into the same cave system that had almost suffocated me once before did cross my mind. The air we were about to breathe had been festering underground for hundreds or thousands of years. The crazy thing was that I was well aware of the dangers, but couldn't stop myself. The lure of the unknown was too strong to resist.

The air was drifting out of the cave entrance, and my lighter flame indicated that it contained low but still safe levels of oxygen. The air quality had changed fast in Tham Huet,

so I intended to check the flame every few minutes. I promised myself that we would exit the cave at the first sign of danger.

The inner cave maintained constant proportions of five to eight metres height and width. No obstacles or breakdowns hindered our progress, and we covered more than a kilometre before we stopped to rest. Nothing lived in the small stream that flowed in the tunnel. I saw no bats hanging from the ceiling and hoped the water-filled sump had prevented them from entering the cave. I didn't dwell on the other logical explanation for the dearth of cave fauna.

We started moving in deeper when Pen, a Ban Tham Lod Shan and trekking guide who had caved with me many times, grabbed my arm. She was the shortest caver in the group, and she was panting. I did a quick check, and the gap between the flame and lighter lengthened at Pen's height.

The passage that snaked ahead could be Thailand's longest, but the fear of asphyxiation dampened my enthusiasm. My previous near-death experience in Tham Huet was still fresh in my mind, and I didn't want to risk any more lives for a hole in the earth. We moved fast and conducted a rushed survey out to the S bend.

I returned to the entrance later in the day to check if the air exiting the cave had improved. A powerful wind was roaring out of the dry sump, and it blew my hair back from my forehead. The toxicity astonished me. My lungs refused to accept the noxious air, and it caught in my windpipe. In less than three seconds, a severe headache pounded my skull. An uneducated guess put the carbon dioxide level at 20 per cent, with negligible levels of oxygen. The air siphoning from deep inside the cave would leave any mammal stone dead within minutes! It was sobering to think that if we had gone in at eight in the morning as we had planned, instead of ten, then we would still be in the cave, kilometres inside, dead and unrecoverable. I renamed our discovery Tham Lom Pit, or Toxic Wind Cave.

Some people underestimate the danger of contaminated cave air. In Kanchanaburi Province near the famous bridge over the River Kwai, rumours of another stash of Japanese war booty lured six local villagers deep inside a cave called Tham Lijia. They crawled down into a pocket of bad air and suffocated.

A caving team from North America, with backing from National Geographic Adventure magazine, came to Pang Mapha in search of caves with substandard air. They carried masks that scrubbed carbon dioxide, and small oxygen tanks for emergency use. I told them they were crazy, and foolish, but they already knew that. The writer, Tim Cahill, who was accompanying them, wrote humorous articles for National Geographic. How he intended to portray the funny side of caving in bad air intrigued me.

The team was not going to retreat under my barrage of sound advice, so I suggested Tham Huet, and some other atrocious caverns. I advised them to check their lighter flame and use their equipment to escape from a dangerous situation, not to push in deeper. I also cautioned them against continuing when the air was moving. They invited me along, but I told them I had a wife, children, cute puppies to feed and my memoirs to write. Tim later wrote that I was 'a David Bowie look-alike with a sense of humour so dry it might be described as desiccated'.

The team found pockets of bad air, enough to test their equipment but, funnily enough, they didn't encounter extreme levels of carbon dioxide or have to rely on their backup oxygen.

Cavers carrying bigger tanks of air, and using re-breathers, might one day conduct a deep probe of Tham Lom Pit. The task of lugging heavy scuba gear into tunnels of deadly gas doesn't appeal to me. I have thought of available alternatives and wondered how much compressed air the motorcycle mechanic in Soppong could squeeze into a tube of mai bo before it exploded. A lightweight set of homemade bamboo tanks with a couple of inner tube valves and a plastic tap to regulate the airflow might be all I need to explore the longest cave in Thailand.

# BAMBOO

**B**amboo is the most versatile plant on the planet. People in our district cook in bamboo lengths and eat from it. They can use bamboo to build the frame, walls, floors and roof of their house and to reinforce concrete slabs. They construct fences, ladders, scaffolding, bridges and dams with bamboo. They fashion bamboo musical instruments, containers, aqueducts, kitchen and garden utensils, animal and fish traps, bows and arrows, mats, baskets, hats and paper. They smoke tobacco in bamboo water pipes and burn dry bamboo for lighting and firewood. In the wet season everyone eats assorted types of bamboo shoots, each with a distinctive flavour and texture. The men in our village derive the majority of their income from tourists riding on their bamboo rafts in Tham Lod.

In Asia people build bamboo rafts that can carry small groups of people over great distances. When the first Homo sapiens migrated from Africa to Asia, they probably used similar rafts to ford rivers and cross open seas.

In Pang Mapha people have recognised the outstanding qualities of bamboo since the early Stone Age. I have seen bamboo wood in excavated pits, preserved in levels older than 5,000 years. Bamboo charcoal lasts much longer – pieces in our district have yielded radiocarbon dates of more than 12,000 years. For millennia, people used bamboo, not stone, to make the things they needed for survival and comfort. The ‘Bamboo Age’ would be a more accurate term when defining this extended period in prehistory.

Deep inside some Pi Maen coffin caves, I have uncovered small beads with a thin layer of gold inside clear glass. These distinctive beads originated from somewhere in the Roman Empire. Prehistoric traders probably walked into the highlands from the Andaman Sea coast to exchange Roman beads and other coloured beads from India for forest products such as



ivory, animal parts, peacock feathers and scented wood or gum.

The simplest way for the bead merchants to return to the coast with their heavy loads would have been on bamboo rafts, descending the Nam Khong, Mae Nam Pai and the Salween River. This journey would have taken no more than two weeks in the dry season. The traders could have carried mountain rice with them and cooked it in lengths of green bamboo. They probably supplemented their rice with fish they caught along the way, fern tips and other wild shoots and leaves.

While searching for caves in the Nam Khong valley, I saw Shan men on fishing and hunting trips poling bamboo rafts. Near the end of the dry season in 1985, soon after we had built Cave Lodge, my friend Dave and I planned to build a raft and ride it 45 kilometres to Mae Hong Son. We walked with a group of guests from the lodge down the Nam Khong and camped at the mouth of a small clear stream, Huai Pah Tueng, close to a source of mai bo.

Mai bo grows in cool, moist areas of limestone karst, and is one of the biggest varieties of bamboo in the world. The girth of a sprouting mai bo shoot is the same size as that of a mature plant. A single shoot can feed an extended hill tribe family. Bamboo is the fastest growing grass plant, and it attains its full height in a few months. Mai bo grows taller than 20 metres and can have a diameter of more than 25 centimetres.

To build a raft that could carry three or four people, we needed eight large lengths of mai bo. Clumps of it grew between car-sized chunks of weathered limestone, 20 minutes walk up the Pah Tueng valley. We selected straight, mature plants and hacked into their bases with a hatchet, the best implement for felling giant bamboo. That was the easy part. The top branches often tangle with other lengths of bamboo, vines and trees. Extracting some of the poles from the canopy required a tremendous amount of twisting, yanking, lifting and dragging.

After we had felled enough bamboo, we chopped out the straightest eight-metre lengths and carried each piece to the river. After five trips each, the weight had sunk aching dents into our shoulders.

We rammed a thin, supple piece of bamboo through holes we had hacked in the ends of

each long pole, then bent both ends of the smaller bamboo over and bound them across the poles with metre-long thin strips of young bamboo. In prehistory, the traders who descended to the Andaman Sea would have constructed their rafts in much the same way.

I wished we were on a Kon Tiki style expedition that was heading all the way to the ocean to test the feasibility of my ancient bead trader hypothesis. Unfortunately, Burmese and Karen soldiers mount car engines on the stern of their long-tailed wooden boats that patrol the lower Mae Nam Pai and the Salween River. A bunch of armed men in a powerboat possibly wouldn't believe my academic excuse for poling a raft in an area off-limits to all tourism.

Long bamboo poles, not paddles, propel bamboo rafts. For quick manoeuvrability, one person stands near the bow and another controls the stern. Working in unison, the polers can transform the heavy and cumbersome-looking rafts into agile craft that can handle grade three rapids. Whether novices like us, on self-made rafts, could achieve the same results as the local experts was still a matter of speculation.

As we poled down the Nam Khong on our maiden voyage, we surprised a Shan man fishing from the bank. He looked at the farang riding rafts that amateurs had built and sneered. He contended we wouldn't make it to Mae Hong Son. Our rafts, he said, would fall apart on Hin Mong (Exposed Rock) Waterfall on Mae Nam Pai.

Nobody had mentioned a waterfall before. Our confidence levels plunged like a sinking boat, but we poled away from the heckler, proud that at least we were giving it a go. Besides, we had expended a lot of energy building our rafts and had drifted well past the point of no return.

The angler's prediction proved right. Our rafts did break up at Hin Mong, but we repaired them and made it to Mae Hong Son on our third day of poling, without any injuries.

Our journey revealed the hazards of riding on bamboo down the Mae Nam Pai. Continual bashing into rocks loosens the bindings that hold a raft together and creates gaps between the bamboo lengths. If a foot slipped between the poles, underwater rocks could snap an ankle or break a leg. Rafts veering off a straight course in a rapid tend to turn sideways. A strong current can ram a broadsided raft against a boulder, flip it on its side and pin it with hundreds

of kilos of water pressure. The best way to free a person stuck between a raft and a rock is to lift one end of the raft with a strong lever, but it can take longer to find a suitable pole than it does to drown.

A taste of this novel yet primitive way of seeing the wilderness of the Mae Nam Pai valley made other methods far less palatable. The rafts travelled long distances and carried our gear, while we expended little effort. After years of trudging up and down hills with heavy packs, this aspect delighted me.

After a few more trips, Diew and I offered to take Top Deck Tours from the United Kingdom on three-day descents of Mae Nam Pai. Top Deck ran bus trips from Kathmandu to London, and the company was popular with young people who wanted an exciting holiday. We were ready to provide it.

Before each trip, most of the participants had pictured bamboo rafting as a gentle drift downstream, interspersed with plenty of opportunities to wave at wildlife and photograph each other. The reality invariably turned out to be a far wilder encounter with nature than they had anticipated. But we led many descents without any mishaps, and the Top Deck tourists raved about their river adventure. Some of them told me they had loved it because they felt overexposed, underdressed, and bordering on unsafe. Then our luck ran out.

One wet season I planned to raft down the Nam Khong, camp at Susa Falls for one night, pole further downstream, then trek to a Lisu village on a higher plateau. Rain had bucketed down for hours on the night before the trip, and the river was running high. Brian, the Top Deck tour leader, together with me and the local guides, decided we would raft the 12-kilometre stretch of river to Susa, a section with a few minor rapids.

We boarded five rafts that carried three people each, including guides. Within minutes, the rain-swelled current had dragged two teams into branches along the riverbank. Further downstream, a raft spun sideways and capsized. The terrified tourists swam to safety, but their raft jammed against rocks in the centre of the surging river. We abandoned it rather than risk more lives trying to lever it off. The raft-wrecked tourists walked along the bank with a guide, while the other teams stayed afloat and fought the flood.

An Austrian soldier on vacation operated the back pole on my raft, and an English girl clung to the bamboo seat in the middle. We handled the river level until the flow swept us hard, out of control, into a corner and under trees. 'Duck!' I screamed. Maybe the Austrian was looking for one on the water when a thick branch thumped into his left shoulder and knocked him overboard. Ahead, the river was curving into a long rapid. I shouted to my young passenger to grab the swimmer. The Austrian was clutching his shoulder with one hand and his head was bobbing in and out of the swirling earth-coloured river. Water was washing into his mouth when he tried to breathe. Pain and panic plastered his face white. I fought to manoeuvre closer, as he kicked towards us. The girl got hold of his shirt, and I helped heave him aboard.

The river forced us into the rapid and the back of the raft veered sideways. We were going to flip. I yelled for someone to grab the back pole. Trembling and shaking her head, the girl hung on to her seat. Gripping his injured shoulder, the soldier staggered to his feet. Over the roar of the water he hollered, 'Ya, I cans do it'. He poled the back straight with his one good arm, and we rode out the rapid. We pulled over in an eddy and waited for the other rafts.

The branch hadn't broken or dislocated his arm, but the situation remained serious. Daylight was fading; the rain continued to beat down, and the river was still rising. The morale of the people walking along the bank and those still on rafts had hit rock bottom. The flood had formed extended wave trains in the normally gentle parts of the river, and we were ploughing into the crests. The swells that surged over the rafts were knocking us off our feet. Apart from the Austrian overboard, I had plucked another girl from the churning water, and she had thanked me for saving her life!

I knew the Nam Susa cascaded into the Nam Khong a few kilometres downstream. I told the tourists we would stop before the waterfalls and walk to a dry cave that would shelter us from the storm. The groups on rafts continued the descent, while the others bush-bashed along the overgrown bank. We stopped upstream from Susa Falls at dusk, and I could hear the roar of the torrent from Tham Susa crashing into the Nam Khong.

Half of our group huddled on the opposite bank. I bound a cobble onto a rope and flung it



across the river. A guide fastened it to a tree. We tied a raft to the other end of the rope and attached another length.

Everyone on the far side of the river had to cross, one at a time, so we could all walk to Tham Susa and escape the continuing downpour. One girl didn't want to board our makeshift ferry. Her raft had capsized early in the trip, and the current had carried her a long way downstream. I shouted that it was safe. We instructed her to sit in the middle of the raft and hold on tight while we pulled her across. I knew what would happen if we lost our grip on the ropes or the raft broke up halfway across, but I kept those thoughts to myself.

As we hauled her towards us I could see her quivering with fear, and I could hear her hysterical moaning over the roar of the river. We heaved the raft in as close as possible to our bank, but she still had to leap the last metre into our arms. I still don't understand what happened next. In what seemed like a suicidal act, she stepped straight into the deep muddy water and sank out of sight underneath the raft. Brian didn't hesitate – he dived in, wrapped his arm around her and dragged her to the surface.

Darkness shrouded our traumatised, wet and shivering group. The descent of the Nam Khong had swept away all their energy and enthusiasm – and probably most of their trust in me. I led the group towards Tham Susa. No trail cut through the forest to the cave, but I knew the area intimately. I stomped a path into the sodden undergrowth, and we reached the gaping entrance half an hour after sunset.

Standing on the edge of the uninviting cavern, I could sense the cave's stale air. It smelt used, like exhaled breath. The group must have thought they had joined a tour down a tropical River Styx. They had barely survived the river, and now I was leading them into a miserable hole in the earth, towards the depths of hell. They collapsed on the dusty cave floor, and the guides and I lit a fire. The yellow flames sputtered and emitted little heat.

The flavour of tainted cave air sticks in your mind like a bad trip on magic mushrooms. When you swallow raw hallucinogenic fungi plucked out of fresh cow dung, the taste never leaves your consciousness. One fleeting whiff can be enough to trigger a flashback. Sniffing the air in Tham Susa, I thought of my near-death experience in Tham Huet.

The group lay out their damp bedding on the dirt. The firewood smouldered, and the smoke lingered in the cave. I watched the cloud descend in a thick layer until it hung half a metre above the ground.

The air was barely breathable, without a fire burning up the available oxygen. I alerted the group to the danger of choking to death in the smoke-filled chamber and told them we should move outside and sleep under an overhanging cliff. They refused to budge – none of them wanted to follow me anywhere – and I couldn't drag them out.

The Thai guides and I slept outside, and we heard the others coughing and spluttering all night. In the morning, smoke from the long-dead fire still filled the cavern, but everyone was alive. We abandoned our plan to descend the river further and trek to the Lisu village. We crossed the Nam Khong on our bamboo ferry and walked upstream, towards civilisation.

I continued to run three-day tours on bamboo rafts in the dry season. My construction skills improved, and most rafts withstood the trip without disintegrating. To avoid chopping down excessive amounts of mai bo, I hired a truck at the end of each tour and transported the rafts back to our launch point.

On my last descent of the Mae Nam Pai on bamboo, I almost drowned in the biggest rapid on the river. The water flowed at dry season level, and the channel snaked through a maze of boulders. Above Hin Mong Waterfall, my raft slid onto a smooth rock, pivoted, and flicked me backwards. The back of my head slammed into the riverbed.

Semi-conscious, I sat up. The head-butt with a stone had bashed me senseless, and my head lolled towards the water. The powerful current at the head of the rapid was dragging me downstream towards raging white water. Dave laid a long bamboo pole across my chest. I could see it, but I couldn't move my arms. I tried to shout, but all I could manage was a faint, 'Help. Help.' Dave, realising I was in danger of drowning, waded into the river and dragged me out.

The accident knocked some sense into my thick skull. I stopped leading, and offering, bamboo raft trips on the Mae Nam Pai, closing an exciting chapter of my life.

When riding the primitive craft, I had felt a deep bonding with nature and the past. I

missed the wilderness campsites and the thrill of descending raging rapids on homemade rafts. I couldn't stop. Just as an opium addict might alleviate his withdrawal symptoms with a few pipes, I introduced short bamboo-rafting descents of the Nam Lang on the route Gary had blazoned on his tube. I also suggested to my Shan neighbours that they build a raft to ferry visitors through the main tunnel of Tham Lod. Two men knocked one up and found that visitors to the cave enjoyed the drift. We had no idea that 20 years later our village would build 100 new rafts every year and earn millions of baht from the service.

I built three rafts to rent out to guests staying at the lodge. I warned them of the dangers involved and offered tips on steering. In the rental package, I included a downstream pickup service where we loaded the rafts onto the roof rack of the Land Rover and brought them back to the lodge to re-use.

I figured that renting rafts to guests was better than hiring out motorbikes. Raft riders required no special skills, a licence or a helmet. We charged more for a short trip on a raft than a day on a bike, and we spent little time on maintenance. The rafts also cost nothing to build, moved at walking speed, used no fuel, made no noise and, at the end of their lifespan, rotted back into the forest they had come from. Bamboo is also a fast-growing renewable resource.

Three young French men, who spoke very little English, had trouble comprehending my instructions. To pass Tham Lod without endangering themselves, I told them they had to stop at the entrance and walk with their raft until they could see light from the other end. At that point, downstream from a dangerous undercut section, it was safe to jump back on the raft and pole again.

They walked back to the lodge less than an hour after they had started their descent. They recounted, using a mix of gestures and simple English, how the river had swept their raft into pitch-blackness. They couldn't steer it or stop it. The two men standing on the back of the raft heard their friend on the front slam into the wall above the undercut. They both jumped off and called to their friend but heard nothing except the roar of water thrusting beneath the cave wall. They thought the river had sucked their friend into a hole in the earth.

The man on the front of the raft was holding the pole across his chest for protection when he hit rock. The river pushed him and the raft under a shelf. When he came up to breathe, nothing but turbulent water filled the undercut. The current bounced his head against the submerged ceiling, and he too thought the river would sweep him into a subterranean drain. Seconds later, the Nam Lang flushed him back into the main flow, and he heard his friends calling his name.

Another group of six guests on two rafts left the lodge at midday one cloudy winter day. Soon after they departed, a freak storm dropped heavy rain on the catchment and the river rose to a dangerous level. I waited at the pickup point until the last light faded from the forest, but no one arrived.

It was cold and moonless – the sort of dark and stormy night that begins a bad story. I had ended a disastrous raft trip on a night like this, but we had torches, food, fire and a cave for shelter. The missing rafters were wearing wet shorts and T-shirts and had nothing else with them. If they hadn't drowned, they still might not last the night. Wherever they were, I knew they were wet, trembling and not going anywhere.

I returned to the lodge and packed lights, blankets and water. I then walked into the forest with one of my guides to the biggest rapid. We headed upstream, calling as we searched, and reached a clearing. I shouted and heard voices coming from the centre of the field, but I couldn't see anyone. We shone our torches and saw their faces poking out of two tall stacks of rice straw.

Darkness was descending when they had broadsided their rafts in a rapid. They knew they couldn't walk back to the lodge without lights so, when they found the haystacks in the clearing near the river, they burrowed in.

I lit a fire to dry their clothes. Some of them seemed a little disappointed I had rescued them from their cosy cocoons and spoilt what would have become a great travellers tale of survival. But no one volunteered to go back into the haystack when I offered to leave with the lights.

On our final raft rental trip, I accompanied a group when the river flowed high. In the last



rapid, our raft turned up on its side, and the man in the middle came off. The raft, with more than a tonne of water behind it, pinned his knee to a rock, tighter than a vice. He started to scream, 'Help. My leg is broken. Save me.' I hacked out a bamboo pole, and we levered the raft off his leg. His injury turned out to be nothing more than a sensation. When the raft had clamped his knee, the powerful flow had washed his lower leg back and forth.

Nobody has braved the Nam Lang rapids on bamboo since the 'broken leg' incident. I missed the crude crafts, the wild rides, and the undiluted danger, but I had to stop. Descending turbulent rivers on bamboo is a life-threatening activity, like driving a decrepit Land Rover on mountain roads. Old rovers and new rafts both have problems with braking, steering, cornering and acceleration. They can also crash, flip and break apart.

# AMBULANCE

I had used and abused the Land Rover for three years, and I knew Cave Lodge needed a new car. The experience of owning a disintegrating 25-year-old rover was not worth the elevated risk of a violent death. The real worth of my vintage relic amounted to its weight in scrap metal.

One memorable mishap in 1987, on the way back from a shopping trip to Chiang Mai, convinced me that the rover was well past its use-by date. I had stacked a tonne of supplies on the back, roof rack and passenger seat, and was driving home alone. West from Pai, the road winds over a high pass before it descends to Pang Mapha District. Halfway down the mountain, I approached a hairpin bend and pumped the brakes. The pedal sank, unhindered, to the floor.

The overloaded vehicle started to accelerate. There was no way it could take the corner. The rover's joke of a handbrake never worked, second gear spun on impaired second-hand cogs, and the synchromesh had perished long ago. A deep drainage ditch bordered the right side of the road, and to my left a near-vertical slope dropped to the road beyond the bend.

I slammed into third gear and then neutral, revved the crap out of the old diesel and double de-clutched. I crunched the stick into second, dropped out of gear, revved again, and then smashed into first. The noise of grating heavy metal climaxed with a resounding thunk. I yanked the knob on the dash that kills the engine, and the rover pulled up like a nervous horse before a jump. If I didn't have both feet pressed hard on the dead brake pedal, I would have smashed my head against the windscreen. I drove home, shit-scared and brakeless, in low gear.

The brakes had failed twice before. Once the brake cylinder rod bent on the way to Soppong,

and I rammed into the back of a truck to stop. I had to drive 200 kilometres in low gear, without brakes, from the lodge to the nearest rover mechanic in Chiang Mai. On another heart-quivering occasion, the steering wheel spun freely, in circles, as I drove out of the lodge. After the beast had ignited just minutes after I had paid for it, the mechanical failures never surprised me, but they whittled away my confidence.

We decided to invest in a safer vehicle as soon as we could afford it. I wouldn't miss the rover. The countless hours I had wasted beneath its grimy belly while trying to fasten clapped-out bits with wire or unbolt its lousy gizzards had fuelled my loathing. I was sick of mixing my knuckle blood with grease.

At the lodge I organised low-priced tours to hardcore caves and regularly transported big groups of guests in my archaic vehicle. Land Rover UK had designed the short-wheelbase model to carry no more than six to eight adults. I owned the Santana version, which was equal in size but made in Spain. I could squeeze two people onto the passenger seat, perch three on the tiny roof rack and let another two cling to the bonnet. If I packed them in tighter than a slab of Burmese cheroots, 15 more backpackers could stand in the back. I was keen to upgrade before disaster struck.

Everything started careering downhill, without brakes, in the closing months of 1987. The Thai government had dubbed it 'Visit Thailand Year' and young travellers ('We're not tourists, man.') were flocking to the Kingdom. Cave Lodge was rocking. Sixty or more people from every corner of the globe jammed into our dorms and funky bamboo bungalows, or slept on the floor by the fireplace in the main house.

Visit Thailand Year boosted our business but, while we were busy making money, trouble was brewing. By the close of the year, the cauldron had boiled over and utter turmoil swamped the lodge.

A long sequence of disasters began after two of our staff fell in love. Lek, a handsome youth with a farming background, and Nit, the sole daughter of a business couple from Chiang Mai, shared a room near the kitchen. Early one morning I saw our young Shan female staff, clutching short brooms behind their backs, glued to small holes in the woven bamboo walls

of the lovers' room. The girls' mouths were open, and they didn't hear my approach. The teenagers later told Diew they were ogling a '69er' for the first time, an act that had exceeded their imagination.

I chastised my staff, and called to Nit and Lek to join us for breakfast. Shan sit on the floor to eat and use their hands to consume common dishes with rice. The sex spectacle titillated the young voyeurs, but the couple had forgotten to wash their hands, and mouths, between bed and breakfast. The girls broke into uncontrollable giggles and refused to share the meal.

All silly fun, until Nit conceived. I noticed her filling out and asked her when her last period was. She guessed that it was about two months ago. She said her father would be furious if he knew of her premarital affair, and wouldn't accept Lek, the poor rice farmer's son. She intended to go to Chiang Mai for an abortion.

Abortion is illegal in Thailand, but a number of clinics and hospitals perform the procedure. My advice was, 'If you do it, use a doctor'.

I was unaware that Nit had already decided to terminate her pregnancy a month earlier. A woman from Ban Tham Lod had tried, without success, to 'massage' the developing foetus and induce a miscarriage.

Nit caught the bus to Chiang Mai. On her return, she said she had consulted a doctor who told her the pregnancy was in its sixth month, but had still agreed to perform an abortion. The doctor had broken her water and told Nit she would give birth to a stillborn baby within 10 days. A week went by and nothing happened. Ten days passed, and I decided to take Nit in the Land Rover on the long trip along rutted roads back to Chiang Mai.

Her contractions commenced an hour before town, and I drove flat out. I had never delivered a baby, and had no one to assist me. The thought of Nit giving birth to a dead baby in my pitiful excuse for an ambulance, on one of the loneliest roads in Thailand, petrified me.

Nit's doctor worked at a private hospital and, after a pleading telephone call from me, she agreed to meet us on the street outside. The doctor told me to rush Nit to Emergency at Suan Dork, the main government hospital. She begged us not to inform the doctors there about her or the abortion. 'Tell them she fell down stairs.'



I drove to the other side of town, weaving through traffic and coercing the old rover to chug along at its top speed, while Nit writhed beside me. I exhorted her to hold it in for a few more minutes.

Nurses at Suan Dork ushered her into the delivery room, and I told the young doctor the truth. Nit's condition concerned me far more than the abortionist's reputation – she had screwed that when she broke Nit's water.

I hadn't been in a hospital for two years. On my last visit, I had watched the birth of Mindy, my daughter. When Diew's contractions had begun, the gynaecologist ran an ultrasound scan. The results showed our baby's head appeared disproportionately large. After a nerve-wracking delivery, the nurses placed our newborn on a set of scales, and she weighed a mere 2.1 kilos. The doctor said the placenta had malfunctioned, but our daughter had an average head size. The gynaecologist pronounced our fully developed but emaciated baby normal. He then gave Mindy a barium meal, x-rayed her, and kept her in an incubator for the next 10 days.

I sat in the corridor alone, thinking of my daughter and worrying about Nit. The nurses probably suspected I was the father of her baby and had sanctioned the belated abortion.

The doors of the delivery room swung open and a group of nurses wheeled Nit out towards the public ward. She looked dazed and depressed, but the nurses were far from sympathetic. They were scolding Nit for trying to abort her baby. I had assumed Nit's abused baby would emerge stillborn, but it had survived, in a drained womb, for 10 days. The irate nurses told Nit she must love and care for her child. They placed the tiny boy into an incubator and lifted Nit onto a hospital bed. The mother of the unwanted, sick baby was suffering from an infected uterus.

Pang Mapha had no telephones or electricity, so I drove to the Arcade Bus Station in Chiang Mai the next morning, hoping to find travellers heading for Cave Lodge. A couple of Europeans had boarded the Mae Hong Son bus and I gave them a message for Diew: 'Tell Lek to come to Suan Dork. He has a sick girlfriend and a son.' It was time for him to take responsibility and relieve me.

The doctor dosed Nit with antibiotics and arrested the infection, but her son's critical

condition deteriorated. The baby lived for just three days.

The demise of the tiny unnamed human lifted a burden from the reluctant parents. Their baby had avoided further suffering, and I shared their guilty relief. We drove back to the lodge in sombre silence. Nit and Lek's relationship finished before the end of the wet season.

By early December, the last of the monsoon rains had drained from the mountain slopes, and the overnight temperature had plummeted to below five degrees. Dense morning mist clogged the Nam Lang valley and obscured the sun. Early risers wrapped themselves in our grey blankets and sat close to the blazing fire in the open-fronted main house.

The winter sun gradually dissipates the mist and, by mid-morning, December days are predictably cloud-free and warm. Winter is peak tourist season and, in 1987, our popularity reached new heights. Diew and I were putting in 15-hour days to keep up with all the work, as well as entertain our guests.

Groups of newly acquainted guests followed my hand-drawn maps and advice and trekked to villages and caves near the lodge. The thrill of exploration fixated one group of five young Australians. Bruce and Sandra, a friendly couple from Sydney, had teamed up with two fit female nurses, whose names have faded, and Ian, who looked more suited to office work than caving. The enthusiastic team rented carbide-gas lanterns from the lodge, and I gave them directions. They inspected small caves in the area for four consecutive days and gained enough confidence to push themselves deeper. On their fifth day of caving, they climbed into the highest caverns in Tham Lod to search for extensions.

Another guest, Paul, preferred his own company. Paul had loitered at the lodge for six weeks earlier in the year and had returned for our 1987 Christmas and New Year celebrations.

In Australia, Paul lived with an alternative community in Terania Creek, near Lismore, in northern New South Wales. Terania is a pristine stream that cascades from national park rainforest and dissects a verdant valley. Crayfish and platypus live in its clear waters. I had hung out in this subtropical 'hip-utopia' in my youth. On my first trip back to Australia, a year before I had met Paul, I had dropped in on friends in Terania and checked out the counter-cultural scene at the Nimbin 'Mardi Grass' festival. I still owned a share in the Tuntable Falls

commune, which occupied the next valley south of Terania Creek.

On his first visit, Paul had spent most days rambling in the wilderness on his own. He slept in the forest when he lost his way or wandered too far to return. I didn't worry when Paul went missing in the bush – I knew where he came from. People live close to nature in Terania Creek, and townsfolk called the forest dwellers 'ferals'.

On Christmas Eve 1987 we feasted on 40 chickens and vegetables we had roasted in our wood-fired ovens. Most of us drank too much and danced wildly in the firelight. Everyone loved the party, except Paul. He indulged in his share of drinking and smoking by the fireplace, but spent much of the night staring blankly into the flames.

When I first met Paul, he had appeared subdued and a little strange. He had asked for my advice about a Thai woman he had met in Bangkok. He liked her, but his non-existent Thai language skills and her zero English made verbal communication impossible. I had strongly cautioned against rushing into intimacy and complicating the tenuous grasp he seemed to have on his life.

It turned out that when he returned to Bangkok from Cave Lodge he had slept with her. Soon afterwards, she had alleged she was pregnant with his baby. Paul said she had hidden his passport so he couldn't leave her.

On Christmas Day Paul told Bruce his grip on reality was slipping. He confided that his Australian doctor had diagnosed him as a schizophrenic. He said he was worried about his confiscated passport and pregnant girlfriend. He told me that everyone at the lodge was staring at him and talking about him. He said the number plates on the motorbikes in the front yard flashed hidden messages. Paul showed us a container full of small pills his doctor had prescribed, but he was unsure how many he should take. He asked for our help.

The festive season came to an abrupt end for me and Bruce. Paul's fragile psyche had cracked under pressure, and there was nobody but us to comfort him. Unfortunately, our paranoid patient had lost his mind in the wrong place to receive competent assistance. Bruce had trained as an industrial arts teacher and I had dropped out of a geology degree. I could tell Paul to leave, but that would be like sending him deep into an unknown cave without a

torch; he could topple down a precipice, or his disorientation could trap him inside a dark hole forever.

Paul's confession scared me. At high school in Sydney I had a friend, Peter, who lived with his schizophrenic brother Alex. Their parents were dead, and they shared an unkept suburban house. Whenever Alex's symptoms became intolerable, Peter had taken his brother to a psychiatric hospital.

Alex had flown to India once, convinced he was the Second Coming of Christ. He claimed that thousands of followers had converged to see the Christ on his arrival, and he declared the trip a great success. Peter told me that airline staff had restrained his brother on the plane, and officials in New Delhi airport had deported him back to Australia.

One day I went to their house and Alex opened the door. He was clutching an Armalite rifle to his chest. Hair sprouted from one side of his partially shaved head, and his eyes bulged. His appearance alarmed me, and I avoided his menacing, freaky stare.

'Peter's gone out', he mumbled in a monotone. He held the rifle up and boasted, 'It fires gold bullets'. He invited me out to the backyard to shoot gum trees. I balked and tried to back away, but he insisted on showing me a list of names on a scrap of paper he carried in his pocket. For each of the names, he said, he had one gold bullet. Alex had scrawled the names of my brother and me, and a number of friends, on his hit list. The next day, Peter arranged for Alex's admittance for more treatment. I didn't dare visit his house again.

We moved Paul into a bungalow close to my room, and I assured him nothing would disturb him there. I told him to take a couple of his pills each day and said he would recover soon. I was wrong.

In the middle of the day on 27 December, Visit Thailand Year, Bruce sprinted into the lodge. His red face glistened with sweat and orange clay streaked his long blond hair. He doubled over, hands on his knees, and hyperventilated. I thought he was going to throw up.

Between deep breaths, he told me that Ian had fallen into a hole, far inside Tham Lod, and smashed his head open. Bruce said Ian was still breathing when he left him with Sandra and the two Australian nurses, but blood was streaming out of the wound. The nurses had told



Bruce that Ian had fractured his skull.

I grabbed lights, a blanket and rope for a stretcher, and chopped a couple of lengths of bamboo from a stand by the lodge. I ran onto the veranda and conscripted four of the biggest young men, including one muscular Canadian. We drove as close as we could to the cave entrance.

Bruce said the accident happened in a part of the cave that was difficult to access, hundreds of metres inside a higher-level cavern beyond two sets of steep ladders. He said Ian had slipped and plummeted about 10 metres.

I knew the place Bruce had described. Ten years earlier, on my first trip into Tham Lod, before there were ladders and tourists, I had reached the ledge where Ian had lost his footing. I had dropped a burning piece of pinewood into the void to see how deep it was, but the bad air in the cavern had extinguished the flames.

Bruce led us to the hole, and we climbed down a precipitous, slick face to the bottom. The nurses had propped Ian against a wall. He was still alive. Blood coated his hair and face. It had saturated his shirt and continued to ooze from a long gash on his skull. More blood had speckled the angular chunks of limestone that covered the floor. It was remarkable that Ian hadn't died on impact after his head-first dive.

The still, oxygen-diminished air in the cavern left us gasping. Sweat-sodden shirts clung to our backs in the stifling humidity, and orange clay caked my slimy palms. Ian mumbled, 'Leave me'. It was a miserable place to die.

I tied a blanket around his torso. Two of the rescuers braced themselves against rocks and pinned the feet of the people lifting the blanket. We hauled Ian up the greasy wall, centimetres at a time, as his head lolled towards the rocks. At the lip of the pit, we lifted his limp body onto our makeshift stretcher and raced him to the top of the ladders. The biggest Canadian draped Ian on his back and lumbered down.

We laid Ian back on the stretcher and jogged out of the cave to the rover. I chucked the bloody blanket, the tangled green cord and stretcher bamboo into the bush and drove flat out to Pai Hospital, two bone-jarring hours away.

The doctor took one look, said the hospital stocked no blood, and told us to take him to Chiang Mai, another four hours drive on a torturous road. I pressed the accelerator to the floor, and we reached Lanna Hospital at dusk. I trusted this place – Mindy was born there, and the doctors had saved her.

Ian was still conscious and told me his phone number in Australia. I rang his family from the hospital. Ian's father, a psychologist working for the army, wanted to send up a plane from the Australian military base in Butterworth, Malaysia, and move his son to a bigger, 'modern' city. I assured him the doctors in Chiang Mai were highly trained and the facilities were first class.

Ten minutes after we had entered emergency, nurses eased Ian into a CAT scanner. An hour later, a surgeon from Suan Dork Hospital began operating. He lifted a big piece of skull and removed a blood clot from Ian's brain. His father's concerns proved to be groundless. When Ian returned home, an Australian doctor commented that the operation was the neatest he had seen, and the work demonstrated that the Thai neurosurgeon ranked with the world's best.

Ian's father had flown into Chiang Mai the day after the operation. I mentioned to him that a guest at the lodge had confided he was a paranoid schizophrenic. I sought his professional advice on how to deal with Paul's condition. The psychologist asked, 'Has he tried to kill anyone yet, or kill himself?' When I told him Paul hadn't, he said, in all seriousness, 'If he sticks around, he will'. I have since learnt this was an exaggerated interpretation but, at the time, it was all I had to go on, and it rattled me. A doomed baby, a cracked skull and a psychotic guest had provoked enough traumas. Now I had to deal with the worry that Paul might resort to a desperate act. I headed back to the lodge and Paul, feeling exhausted and uncertain. Our dream-inspired life in the mountains was turning into a veritable nightmare.

My parents were staying at the lodge for Christmas and New Year. I loved to see them but, since the bungled abortion, I'd been running around in circles like a decapitated chicken. I wished I could stop, relax, and spend some time with them. I appreciated their visits. I had left Australia in 1976 on a two-year trip to see the world, and had been back only once, in

1986. For the first 10 years I had lived in Asia, my life savings had fallen short of the price of the return airfare.

An indulgent two-day bash blasted us into the New Year. All the hungover guests at the lodge thanked us for the great party, except Paul. He chose to kill himself on 2 January 1988. Paul told Bruce he had swallowed his prescription medicine, more than 50 pills, in one gulp.

Bruce and I did everything we could think of to make Paul vomit. We squeezed his guts; we force-fed him saltwater and raw eggs. My staff suggested tablespoons of MSG. Nothing worked, until Bruce wrenched open Paul's mouth while I shoved my hand down his gullet and forced him to heave. We checked his puke for pills. There was none.

Paul's medication drifted in his bloodstream, and for all we knew he had absorbed a lethal amount. I eased him into the rover and headed for Mae Hong Son Hospital. Two hours drive down the road, Paul displayed no adverse reaction, so I drove back home.

We faced another predicament. Paul had swallowed all the pills that suppressed his schizophrenia and kept his behaviour predictable. I decided to take him to see a psychiatrist in Chiang Mai, rather than the local doctor.

Diew and I had planned to drive to the city that day anyway and buy a safer vehicle – one with brakes that always worked. The rover was falling apart. Cavities in the floor let in foul diesel fumes and fine dust. Less than a week earlier, I had driven the junk heap for five hours on skull-rattling roads with a dire emergency patient sprawled in the back. The rough ride could have ripped the drip from Ian's arm, or worsened his brain damage.

Now, with Ian still recovering from surgery in Lanna Hospital, I was flogging the sluggish ambulance again with another patient who might perish from the pathetic pace. As we crept up the hills, choking on black exhaust smoke, Paul confided that he knew when his insanity was taking control. He remembered everything, and he craved for an escape from his psychosis. One part of his tortured mind yearned to end it all, while the other fought to live. I understood that he had confessed his suicide attempt to Bruce because of his excruciating dilemma. He said that when he took his pills he felt fine, but dopey. Paul's desire to lead a normal life without drugs had invoked his latest crisis.

At the crowded Suan Prung Psychiatric Hospital, the overworked doctor could spare us only a few minutes. While I translated, he asked Paul a few cursory questions and then prescribed more tablets. We departed the hospital with no idea of what to do with our suicidal guest.

Paul had spent six sane weeks in my home. I had endeavoured to help him, as a friend, by sheltering him at the lodge after his breakdown. I feared Paul would face unforeseen dangers if he travelled in Thailand alone, but the drama of the previous days had changed my mind. I now wished he would move on, or go home, and take his problems elsewhere.

We checked him into the Garden Guesthouse. He assured us he would stay there a while and take his prophylactics. Diew and I said goodbye, parked the rover at a garage, and went to buy a Toyota pickup.

On 5 January 1988 we stacked our new blue truck with supplies and headed back to the lodge, without Paul. The police at Mae Ya, a provincial border checkpoint for Mae Hong Son Province, stopped us. They said they had heard a farang had died at Tham Lod. We told them he was alive and recovering from brain surgery in Chiang Mai. Paul, our other patient, was also then still alive, and far from any caves.

From Mae Ya, we headed downhill on the 1095 highway towards Muang Pai. I liked the new experience of being able to trust the brakes.



# MURDER AND MAYHEM

Pai was changing fast. Buses and private cars plied the new sealed road from Chiang Mai, and entrepreneurs had opened a couple of guesthouses on the main street. Foreign backpackers were trickling in, and they enjoyed the languorous, small-town atmosphere. On the road west of the town, the Thai army was establishing a major military base. Pai even boasted a few brothels near the new market.

After Pai, the road twisted up a steep mountain to Kiew Lom (Wind Saddle). At an elevation of 1,400 metres, the saddle demarks the boundary for Pang Mapha District. Pang Mapha, a Shan name, means 'a place where limes grow'. I handed a bag of mandarins to the police at the checkpoint, as a token of appreciation for their presence.

Passing this point brought back memories of a time before the Kiew Lom checkpoint existed. In 1984 I had driven our Land Rover up to the saddle and found a large log blocking the road. The sun was setting and there was nobody in sight. A cold wind howled across the pass, and I could feel a chill in my spine. I dropped into low gear and steered the rover into bushes and around the roadblock. Diew and I stared into the dark forest on both sides of the road. Nothing moved except the branches in the wind.

We descended the mountain a few kilometres. In the distance we could see a pickup approaching at high speed. The driver flagged us down and, when the dust cleared, we saw police officers sitting in the back of the truck, clutching automatic weapons. The driver asked if we had seen a group of armed men dressed in black. He said they had held up and shot at cars on the saddle.

We continued, in fading light, downhill towards Soppong on a deserted road. Then, without warning, near the base of the mountain, three men with blackened faces, wearing black

clothes and holding what looked like rifles, jumped onto the road. I hesitated. Should I try to stop then crunch into reverse, or should I gun it and run the gauntlet? I pumped the brakes, and the rover slowed down.

The men in black, with charcoal-smudged faces, turned out to be local Lahu tribesmen with knives and rakes. They had been burning and clearing forest for rice fields and wanted a ride down the road. I let them stand on the back bumper.

The 1984 incident had persuaded the Soppong police to establish a permanent checkpoint at Kiew Lom. Their presence had transformed the spectacular but insecure mountain route from Pai to Pang Mapha into a safe tourist drive.

Forty kilometres from Pai I turned our new, 1987 model Toyota Hilux off the 1095 highway at Soppong and headed north on the dirt road to Cave Lodge. We crossed the Nam Lang and then nearly sideswiped a speeding police truck heading the other way. The Isuzu braked and backed up. Lek sat in the back with a bunch of heavily armed cops, and he looked scared. Diew and I knew something terrible must have happened while we were away.

‘Menying Farang dtai; dtorn kah dtai! Puen gaha but sop.’ Lek spoke in his native Kum Muang and his voice cracked with emotion. ‘A farang woman is dead; murdered! They just found the corpse.’ Diew and I gaped at him in astonishment. Lek told us Buddhist monks had come across the body near Tham Lod just two hours ago.

The police at the Mae Ya checkpoint were right. A foreigner had died near the cave while we were in Chiang Mai. Had we met her? Lek said she had rented Bungalow 6 the day we had left for the city. Our one consolation was that Paul could not have killed her.

We drove directly to the forestry station near Tham Lod. A group of villagers pointed south, and Diew and I sprinted over the hill above the cave. The trail meandered through a grove of tall evergreen trees and passed a meditation monastery near the downstream entrance. Our lungs pounded, and we slowed to a jog. The track split, and we took the narrow right fork between clumps of bamboo into the valley of a small seasonal stream. We followed an overgrown path along the northern bank and ran into a cluster of crying farang and a throng of grim-faced police.

I recognised nobody except Captain Somchai. He was the shortest cop there, but his stocky frame filled his uniform. The enigmatic officer had called in at the lodge on a few occasions during the previous months. His candid humour and provocative jokes could be entertaining, and I laughed when he did, but usually I felt intimidated by his presence in my home. I was a foreigner, squatting illegally in a border-region village and running an unregistered guesthouse without a work permit. Like everyone else in the district, I broke half a dozen laws every day, and we both knew it.

The captain waved to me from the dry streambed. I detected a look of restrained excitement in his dark eyes. I nodded back, then turned to introduce myself to the group standing bunched together on the elevated bank. A European woman took me aside and told me she was a nurse. She said her group had searched for Ewa for two days and nights. She asked me to follow her down to the streambed.

Ewa lay face up on dry sand and cobbles. She wore a T-shirt and sarong and was barefoot. The nurse pointed to multiple footprints in the sand near the body, and a tiny puncture mark on one of Ewa's arms. She said someone had interfered with her underwear which, she said, indicated the murderer might have sexually abused her. The killer had placed Ewa's shoes high on her chest, possibly to hide bruises on her neck. He – I assumed the murderer was male – had strangled Ewa with a jungle vine that he had twisted off a plant nearby. The nurse said she thought Ewa's Australian boyfriend Peter should not see the body.

The vicious killing of one of my guests appalled me. I sucked in long, deep breaths to help calm my jitters. Somchai was walking around, examining the area. He handed me a camera and told me to take pictures of the crime scene and the corpse. He had always complemented me on my caving photographs. A medic was conducting an examination, and Somchai instructed me to shoot a long sequence. Each photograph I took imprinted images in my mind that I would never forget.

When the police had completed their initial investigation, I walked up onto the bank to meet Peter. Friends from the lodge were consoling him. He sobbed, head in his hands, and his tears were contagious. This wasn't the right time to tell him how his girlfriend had died.

The distraught guests related to me their accounts of the preceding days. Peter and Ewa had teamed up with Janette, an English girl, and they had gone to the cave together on the afternoon of 3 January 1988. The trio had walked in the waist-deep Nam Lang through the cave tunnel. At the downstream entrance they mingled with other farang who were waiting to watch the swarms of swifts fly into the cave and the resident bats fly out.

Peter, they said, had moved to the back of the chamber and was talking with a group when Ewa, wet after wading in the cave stream, told Janette she felt cold. She had headed off, alone, back to the lodge, on an unmarked path she had never walked on before.

When Peter returned to the lodge, Ewa wasn't there. He had sprinted back to the cave, shouting her name as he went, checking both sides of the path. Darkness descended, and his alarm heightened. He alerted people who were staying at the lodge and told the staff. That night, groups of guests and staff searched along the route to the cave. The next day, local police and Ban Tham Lod villagers joined them.

I walked back to the forestry station with the head of the tourist police who had flown in from Chiang Mai on a helicopter. His presence reflected how seriously the Thai police treat the rape and murder of a tourist. I presumed they would apprehend the culprits within a week. The commander asked me if I had any idea who had killed Ewa, and what the motive might have been.

The nurse had pointed to more than one set of footprints in the sand near the body. I proposed that silencing the victim of a gang rape loomed as a possible motive for the murder. The perpetrators may have feared Ewa would be able to identify them.

The location of the body, and the time of the murder, implied that locals familiar with the area were likely suspects. Although the dry creek bed is close to the cave, few people use the path that skirts the northern bank. I hadn't walked down it before. Furthermore, people from other villages normally wouldn't be near the cave that late in the afternoon. Maybe an ethnocentric bias had influenced my thoughts, but I didn't then consider farang travellers as possible suspects.

Later, I reflected on the simple logic I had employed on that late afternoon walk back from



the crime scene. Was it a coincidence that Ewa met her assailants on the way back to the lodge, or did they plan their assault? Were they targeting a Cave Lodge guest, or were they waiting for any foreign woman to leave the cave alone? My head filled with questions that only the killers could answer.

Whether or not the killing was premeditated, the people who had raped and strangled Ewa committed an act of incomprehensible violence against an innocent traveller. I tried to think of someone I knew who was capable of committing such a heinous crime.

One person stood out as the most plausible suspect. The Soppong police had told me that a few years back they had charged Toon, the assistant headman of Ban Tham Lod, with murder, but had uncovered insufficient evidence to prosecute him. Toon had an aggressive temperament that was exacerbated by alcohol and, when he was drunk, he displayed an open contempt for foreigners. Once he had directed his rage at Diew and me because we made money from tourism, while he gained nothing. This incensed outburst had surprised and concerned us.

This wasn't the first assault on a lone female guest from the lodge. About a month before the murder of Ewa, a young German grandmother told me about an incident that had occurred at Tham Lod. She said she was standing alone in the twilight at the entrance chamber as the swifts swarmed into the cave. The birds fly at high speed and navigate by bouncing sound waves off the cave walls. Their incessant chirping fills the cavern with distracting noise. She saw a few birds collide and drop into the river, where large carp gobble them up in an instant, feathers and all. The spectacle had absorbed her, and she hadn't noticed a young monk from the nearby forest monastery enter the cave mouth.

The arrival of the novice monk surprised her, but he seemed genial. He invited her to climb two sets of steep guano-coated ladders at the back of the entrance chamber and visit the Pi Maen cave. The monk led the German woman into the dark burial chamber and showed her the prehistoric log coffins. Then, without warning, he began groping her. In a state of shock, she shoved him away, hurried out of the cave, and ran back to the lodge.

Diew and I tried to persuade her to point out the molester monk when he collected alms in

our village the next morning so we could inform the abbot. She declined and left for Chiang Mai.

The scenario of a novice, or a group of monks, raping and killing Ewa was improbable, but I implored the police to investigate the German woman's serious allegation.

The molestation incident had disconcerted me, but the disappearance of another female guest at the lodge frightened me far more. In late 1985 a nurse from Norway had stayed in a dormitory room in our main house. She hadn't told anyone of her plans when she checked out. A few days later, one of our staff saw her backpack in a corner of the dorm. We assumed she had intended to walk in the area and return for her gear.

When she didn't return, we notified the local police and, with the encouragement and help of a Scandinavian guest, contacted consular officials in Bangkok. We asked people in Red Lahu, Karen and Shan villages who lived within a day's walk of the lodge, but nobody had seen her. She disappeared without a trace.

I always encourage our single female guests to avoid walking unaccompanied anywhere and to leave their valuables in our safe. Women face risks when travelling alone anywhere in the world, and Thailand is no exception. One guest told me a bus attendant on the overnight bus from Bangkok to Chiang Mai had served her spiked cola, which had rendered her incapable of screaming or moving. She had watched in terror as a man removed valuables from the money belt inside her shirt. The effects of the drugged drink had worn off, but it took weeks for her fear to subside.

Crimes against farang were rare in Pang Mapha, which was surprising considering its proximity to Burma and the incentive of instant wealth. In the 1980s most of the people in the area earned less than \$2 a day. A typical tourist's money belt held the equivalent of 10 years pay. Shan soldiers across the border earned \$2 a month. If they robbed a tourist, they could gain a lifetime's worth of army wages.

I had thought that people, especially women, would refrain from walking in remote, unfamiliar areas alone. Even if a lone trekker left her valuables with us, an accident like a sprained ankle or a snakebite could spell doom in the mountains.

On rare occasions, my guests disputed this advice and insisted that Thailand is safe. I agreed, but I questioned whether they would walk alone in isolated, unfamiliar wilderness in their own country. As a last resort, I would raise the threat of a chance encounter with a strung-out, sex-starved soldier who had escaped from the Shan United Army, with his weapon. Worse, she could meet a group of them.

One particularly alarming aspect of the murder of Ewa was that her assailants had attacked her so close to the lodge, in a place I had considered safe.

The police helicopter carried Ewa's body from the forestry station to Suan Dork Hospital for an autopsy, and Somchai accompanied me back to the lodge. He required a statement from every person who was at the cave on the evening of Ewa's death. I volunteered to drive the guests to the police station in Soppong that night and help interpret.

The near demise of Ian, and then Paul, had drained me emotionally, but the guests who had searched for Ewa and comforted Peter while I was in Chiang Mai were feeling worse than I was. They were suffering from various degrees of post-traumatic stress, and some of them needed counselling. After a quick dinner, I drove them to Soppong.

The decades-old police station, a two-storey wooden structure with a rusted corrugated iron roof, stood alone on a grassy enclosure in the old part of the town. Somchai met us outside and we followed him up a broad, creaking staircase to an upstairs office. Naked light bulbs dangled on grime-caked wires from the ceiling and emitted a yellow glow. Grey metal filing cabinets and teak desks cluttered the square room. Dusty stacks of documents filled the gaps between the furniture.

I sat on a bench in front of a clacking typewriter and shivered as the winter air drifted through open shutters. For the next five hours I translated names and birth dates of each of the guests, individual accounts of the events leading up to the murder, and dozens of other pieces of personal information.

The following day the police began the interviews around midday and finished at two o'clock the next morning. When it was over I drove Peter over the mist-chilled mountains to Pai so that he could catch the first bus to Chiang Mai. I made it back home at dawn and snuggled

into bed with Diew, under six blankets. I felt like a hit-and-run victim, after the vehicle had backed up and squashed my head.

The lodge was bustling with 40 new guests who had little idea of the recent catastrophe. Bruce and Sandra, who had already shared so much heartbreak with us, had trashed their travel plans and were helping us throughout this harrowing period. My parents were staying at 'Wilderness', a new lodge Diew and I had built in the Nam Khong valley on the way to Mae Hong Son. I lacked the time and the inclination to rouse them from their seclusion with news of the latest disaster. I had no idea the chaos engulfing Cave Lodge had barely kicked off, or that it would climax in a penalty shoot out.



# SCHIZOID

The night after the police interviews, Paul turned up from Chiang Mai. He appeared spacey, and a depressing frown clouded his features. His intense bluish-grey eyes avoided me. I shivered; he wasn't taking his medication. He was the last repeat guest I wanted to see in my fragile state of mind, and I fought the urge to tell him to find another guesthouse.

Paul loomed over me in size and weight. Normally, he behaved like a docile gentle giant, but normality had checked out of Cave Lodge. The psychologist's ominous warning had resurfaced, and I couldn't cope with any more stress. Too many people had died already.

Paul's unexpected arrival, and his precarious condition, also concerned Bruce. The workload in the lodge prevented us from keeping him in our sight at all times. He skulked on the edge of the crowd, in the shadows away from the pressure lanterns.

At ten that night Bruce ran into the kitchen and told me he suspected Paul had done something. We confronted him and demanded to see his pill container. He refused, so we dug it out of his pocket. He said he had spilt all his medication. We pressured him to trust us with the truth, and Paul admitted he had gulped down all his pills. He must have taken a massive dose, because a few days earlier the doctor in Chiang Mai had prescribed him 100 tablets.

Late at night, on top of everything else, Paul had sprung a home delivery of extra anxiety. We already had more serial disasters than we could handle on our plate. 'This is insane', Bruce muttered.

'Shit!' was all I could muster. Fortunately, our expertise at handling Paul's suicidal inclinations had improved since our first effort. Within seconds, I was fingering Paul's tonsils, and the big man began throwing up the contents of his guts into our kitchen sink.

I went out into the main room where our guests were sitting by the fire, drinking and pairing up for the night. The laid-back atmosphere at the lodge and the chilly nights facilitated the temporary bonding. I interrupted the noisy gathering. 'Excuse me', I shouted. 'Is there a doctor in the house?' The inebriated assembly fell silent.

Surprisingly, yet another Australian responded and said she was a nurse. Aussies say some attractions are like 'blowflies to shit', or maybe I was experiencing a coincidental conspiracy with Australians targeting the lodge – a series of three 'down-under' disasters in a row was strange. And, knowing our luck, things could only get weirder, or worse.

I described the problem and led her into the kitchen to meet Paul. He reeked of vomit and looked suitably deranged. She approached him with confidence.

'Hello Paul, I'm a nurse and can help you. Where are you from Paul?' He gave her a blank look and she asked again.

'Terania Creek', he mumbled.

'Who is your doctor in Lismore Paul?' She knew Terania Creek!

He told her a name.

'Paul, I work for your doctor.'

Bruce and I exhaled together. 'Bullshit!' I said under my breath. The conspiracy theory had gained more credence. Was she for real?

I glanced at Bruce, and we raised our eyebrows and opened our mouths in mutual scepticism. Did nurses use this ploy to gain a patient's trust, or was schizophrenia contagious? We called her aside and, to our astonishment, we established that she did work for Paul's doctor as a psychiatric nurse.

I ushered her into the front of the pickup, sat Paul between us, and headed towards Chiang Mai. Bruce rode shotgun in the back. The nurse and I spent the entire trip reassuring Paul. 'We are your friends, you can trust us', we told him. The whole thing 'really isn't' a set up, and he was 'gunna be fine'. Paul was hovering in a spacey place I never wanted to visit – a place I called 'Paranoia Ville'.

At three in the morning, after driving down at high speed from the lightless hills, the

blazing neon tubes outside Emergency at Suan Dork Hospital made us squint. We marched inside a large room, flanking Paul. A warm stench of washed wounds displaced the pure, cold mountain air. The bleached uniforms of the nurses and the starch-white walls contrasted with a splattering of blood-soaked casualties on stretchers. Paul's glazy eyes bulged with uncertainty as he scanned the scene. He fidgeted near a row of curtained booths and said, 'This is a set up!'

Bruce and I, high from sleep deprivation and brain-draining dramas piled on top of each other, moved away and couldn't stop giggling. 'He's right you know, this is a set up', whispered Bruce. 'Yeah', I agreed, 'let's knock him out and get outta here'.

We convinced the doctor to sedate Paul with something strong, and we watched him lose consciousness. We drove into town to look for a place to crash.

We slept in until midday, then walked to a Thai curry stall for a late breakfast. Paul had left a diary in his bag on the back seat of the car, and we flicked through it while we ate. Scary, suicidal desires and other unsettling entries filled the pages. I left the food stall and drove to the hospital to find Paul. We intended to take him to see a representative from the Australian Embassy in Bangkok who had flown to Chiang Mai to gather information on Ewa's murder. I was floundering, way out of my depth, and it was time for the Cave Lodge Psychiatric Clinic to refer its patient.

Paul wasn't there. The nurses said he had woken up and walked out, and they had no grounds to restrain him. We found him sunning himself on the lawn of the Garden Guesthouse. He looked relaxed, and I told him to wait there while we went to find the embassy official in a fancy hotel near the night bazaar. The meeting turned into a frustrating waste of time. We presented the diary, our physical evidence of Paul's insanity, and requested the embassy send Paul home to his family in Australia. The consul said all he could do was recommend a hospital and a travel agent in Bangkok.

Bruce and Sandra escorted Paul to Bangkok, checked him into a nursing home, and arranged his flight to Australia. It wasn't the first time concerned strangers had sent Paul home from a foreign country. We thought people like Paul, with a repetitive history of severe

breakdowns, should face restrictions that prevent them from travelling abroad alone.

I did see Paul again at Cave Lodge. The woman who had claimed she carried his baby accompanied him from Bangkok. She told Paul their baby had miscarried. He hadn't seen her pregnant and he thought she might have made up the story. They still couldn't understand each other.

They spent a few days at the lodge drinking copious amounts of beer, while arguing and verbally abusing each other in their own language. Paul asked me to translate his marriage proposal. I explained Paul's troubles to the woman and counselled Paul on the tribulations of cross-cultural relationships. Neither of them expressed any misgivings or wanted more information. Maybe they were compatible. I was past caring.

I never saw Paul again. I heard he settled in northeast Thailand and sired seven children with his tough wife. In 2003 friends from Terania Creek told me that Paul had passed away after succumbing to cirrhosis of the liver.

Paul was not the last disturbed Australian we had to deal with. One day an attractive 20-year-old arrived at the lodge with an Australian couple. She reminded me of someone who had ingested too many magic mushrooms. In my teens I had peered over the edge of a psilocybin high and glimpsed the black hole that sucks in fragile brains. Maybe she had toppled into the abyss.

She appeared cheerful but babbled non-stop about circles, and the centre, and here it comes again.

'What's your name?'

'The name in the centre, here we are, there it goes, back again...' she blathered.

The couple said they had seen her on the bus from Pai, and thought she was strange. They didn't know what to say when she followed them to the lodge. Another guest said he had seen her leaving on a trekking tour from Pai. Maybe she had tripped into the void after smoking opium.

I was reluctant to accept a new patient, especially one who didn't know who she was. I opened her shoulder bag and took out her passport and a notebook with names and phone



numbers. I asked the couple she had tailed if they minded helping out a compatriot. We all squashed into the front of my pickup and headed for the nearest doctor and telephone in Mae Hong Son.

Her trippy non-stop ranting dominated the two-hour drive to the hospital. The doctor on duty in Emergency said she looked happy and talkative, and wondered why we had brought her. I translated a short spurt of her gibberish, and the doctor asked me what we wanted to do with her. It had worked for Paul, so I asked the doctor to knock her out for the night.

It was three in the morning in Australia when I started calling numbers in her book, reverse charges. I ascertained her parents were travelling overseas and her sister lived in Japan, in a house without a telephone. One of her friends said she had a boyfriend. I called and woke him up.

‘Hello, who is it? What time is it?’

‘Hi mate, it’s late, and I’m calling from northern Thailand. Your girlfriend has suffered a mental breakdown and needs your help.’

‘What? Is she OK?’ He sounded worried and confused, which was good for us.

‘Has she been asking for me?’ She hadn’t spoken his name – she didn’t even know her own.

‘Mate, she’s safe now and yeah, she’s been asking for you constantly and wants you here.’

‘In Thailand?’

‘Look, it’s easy. As soon as you get up, find a travel agent who can put you on the first flight to Bangkok, with a connecting flight to Chiang Mai. Australian friends are taking her to Chiang Mai, and they will call you and tell you where she is.’

The couple was staring at me with their mouths open. I offered them a lame smile and excuse – ‘Sorry guys, I didn’t have much choice.’ I handed them the girl’s valuables and told them to use her money for their plane tickets to Chiang Mai and other expenses. She and her family would be grateful one day. They were a kind and responsible couple, and I was confident they could handle the inevitable hassles. I never heard from any of them again.

# FEAR AND HOSTILITY

The murder investigation seemed to be making little progress. The autopsy had revealed that Ewa died from strangulation, but her blood contained a potentially lethal amount of heroin. The pathologist found no evidence of a struggle before or after the single injection into her arm. The police, armed with the report, were gravitating towards a hypothesis that a farang, or at least someone who spoke English, had committed the murder.

Somchai had picked up a fully opened cigarette packet near the cave. Thai smokers, he informed me, bite off one corner and pull out their fags one by one. The captain concluded that this new 'evidence' fitted with the lack of bruising near the needle mark and on Ewa's body. He further believed her relaxed fingers proved she had not resisted her assailants. The police suspected she had consented to casual sex with strangers and had allowed a heroin user to administer her death needle.

When Ewa died, Stephane, a French backpacker, was staying at River Lodge, a guesthouse in the Nam Lang valley downstream from Cave Lodge. Stephane used heroin and sported a distinctive, reddish, Mohawk hairstyle. Two Israeli tourists told the police they had seen him walking alone near the cave on the evening of the murder. He had left the area the same day monks found Ewa's body but, nine days later, he returned from Pai to buy heroin in a Lahu village near Soppong. An alert police officer recognised Stephane and immediately arrested him.

Somchai called me in to translate his interrogation. I used the opportunity to question Stephane alone. We talked in the cramped, musty lockup behind the station's staircase, and I concluded that he had lacked the time and a motive to commit the crime. Stephane also

maintained his habit softened his libido and pacified him. Hitting up heroin, he said, did not transform him into a killer rapist. The police held him in prison on drug charges, while they searched for more proof of his involvement in the crime.

The police investigators connected additional bits and pieces of evidence to the murder. They detected drops of blood and strands of auburn hair on a fence near the path between the village and the cave. Somchai's team collected black pubic hairs in a field hut nearby. Outside the cave entrance they bagged my bloody blanket and nylon cord and, for a brief period, I became the prime suspect.

Not long after the police accused me of involvement in the murder, a reliable source told me a serious rumour was circulating in Bangkok. Bertil Lintner, a Swedish journalist friend, told me he had heard the Mae Hong Son police suspected I dealt in drugs. He theorised that the heroin-related death of a tourist at my lodge may have influenced the instigation and subsequent spread of the rumour.

The commander of the Mae Hong Son police had threatened to close the lodge because of the heroin 'connection,' but dealing drugs added a new kink in the case, with far more grave overtones. The possibility I featured on a police blacklist of drug merchants alarmed me. If I had owned anything then, I would have written a will.

Bertil was 'the expert' on the political situation in Burma and a leading authority on the Golden Triangle drug trade. His highly respected reports on Burma were accurate and incisive. The military junta disliked criticism and had probably added Bertil's name to their secret list.

Bertil advised me to contact Bill Mellor, an Australian journalist based in Bangkok. I was going to the city anyway to renew my passport, so I telephoned Mellor and asked if he had heard the drug-dealer rumour. He said he hadn't, but suggested I enquire at the Australian Embassy where he knew some officials. We went together to meet his contacts.

The embassy staff had no information on any nefarious rumours. I returned home and forgot about it, until I received a letter from my mother with a clipping from the Sun Herald newspaper. The popular Sydney paper had devoted a half page to a story on how I was afraid

the Thai police might frame me for selling drugs, and for murder. The headline read, 'Aussie seeks Embassy help'. A picture of me with the caption, 'SCARED, John Spies' accompanied the report.

My mother found parts of the story disturbing:

Yesterday, Spies' friends in Thailand said they held grave fears for his safety.

They advised the family to move out of the area – advice Mrs Spies is now urging her husband to consider.

They believe comments Spies made criticising the police investigation and supporting the theory that Ewa was raped antagonised some locals who are already envious of his successful business.

'We thought he was mad to open a guesthouse in such a dangerous area so close to a major drug route', said one friend.

'All someone has to do is hide some opium in Cave Lodge and call the police and he's in real trouble. Or someone could simply try and kill him. His life is definitely in danger.'

The quotes from friends surprised me. Nobody had ever told me I was mad or advised us to move out of the area for our safety. Had a story-hungry journalist embellished a false rumour? I hoped so. The ominous tone of the article, though, did reflect the prevailing mood at the lodge.

Toon, the alcoholic I suspected of murdering Ewa, had turned nasty. Villagers were pulling down and hacking Cave Lodge signs to pieces and scattering tacks on our access road. Wat, Diew's brother, hid in the bushes one night and fired his shotgun into the air to scare young men who were vandalising a new sign. Toon had convinced them the lodge was causing problems for the Ban Tham Lod Shan because the police now suspected locals of killing Ewa. This twisted logic bothered us and raised the possibility of an ulterior motive for the murder, besides a psychopathic hatred of women. Were Toon and his accomplices trying to scare us away so they could grab our guesthouse?

Some evenings Toon stood by our front gate and stared inside our open kitchen while he worked the shell-changing mechanism on his shotgun. The sharp clacking sounds coming



from the gloom terrified us. We requested, and received, police protection. For added security, we armed ourselves with any guns we could lay our hands on. The police advised us to shoot first if anyone attacked, and they would help sort out any problems later.

The murder became a major story in Australia, and newspapers featured articles on the crime. 'Drugs and sex clues in strangling mystery of Australian tourist' ran one headline. A crew from a popular Australian TV program, 60 Minutes, arrived at the lodge with Ewa's father and sister, and stayed a few days. The team filmed elephants standing beneath stalactites in the entrance chamber of Tham Lod. Another sequence captured Ewa's family in tears at the place where she had died. They interviewed local villagers, and me, and strived to dig up new evidence or anything controversial they could relate to the murder.

The publicity was spinning an already brittle situation out of control. Pressure was mounting on the local police to solve the case. Emotions were running hot, and I was in the midst of it all.

One day Captain Somchai and Ewa's father, Waldemar, talked privately on the veranda of the bungalow where Ewa had spent her last night with Peter. I agreed to interpret their conversation. The setting upset Ewa's father, and he was having trouble maintaining his composure. 'When you find the bastard that killed my daughter', he said to the captain, 'I want to come back and kill him myself'. As a father with a young daughter, I sympathised with Waldemar's outrage.

I translated and Somchai replied in Thai, 'Don't worry, I promise, man to man, I will do it for you'.

When 60 Minutes showed the program in Australia, the presenter 'revealed' that I had withheld information from the police – I had not informed them that a certified schizophrenic was staying at Cave Lodge around the time of the murder. He also claimed that the doctor who conducted the autopsy had isolated another drug, besides heroin, in Ewa's body that was related to the medicine Paul had taken to control his schizophrenia.

I treated this assertion with scepticism. If the doctor's analysis was correct, I suspected the 'other drug' was probably a psychoactive ingredient in cheap Thai headache powder that

dealers had mixed with the heroin. Besides, Paul was with Diew and me in Chiang Mai at the time of the murder. He hadn't met Ewa and could not have killed her. I purposely didn't mention Paul's condition to the police because I wanted them to focus on legitimate suspects, not scapegoats. Who knows what would have happened if they arrested Paul and withheld his medication? He had enough real problems already.

I regretted telling 60 Minutes anything about Paul. Their insinuation that I had withheld evidence from the Thai police angered me. Throughout the investigation I had tried my utmost to help Captain Somchai decipher the mystery of Ewa's murder and arrest the culprits. To his credit, Somchai kept his cool and methodically sifted through the conflicting evidence and false leads until he was certain he had solved the case.

# COLD BLOOD

Six months after the murder, Somchai apprehended an immigrant from Burma, a Shan heroin addict named Jor Min. The Sydney Sun Herald ran a story on the breakthrough with the headline: 'The brain-jangled addict who couldn't keep his mouth shut'. The Pang Mapha police subsequently obtained confessions from two other non-local Thai men. They both had married Shan women from Ban Tham Lod and lived in our village.

One of the arrested men, Ngern, was the brother of a man we call Scarface. Scarface had moved to Ban Tham Lod from Chiang Mai several years before me. Some people said he had fled his lowland village to escape prosecution for a serious crime. The other suspect, a heroin user named Suk, could communicate in English. Suk worked in the River Lodge that Scarface had built in the valley downstream from Cave Lodge.

Scarface's sinister reputation and demeanour had always perturbed me, and I had avoided any confrontations that might antagonise him. When Peter was searching for Ewa after she failed to return from the cave, he had seen Scarface standing in the overgrown fields below the lodge, looking suspiciously up at the main house. When the 60 Minutes team interviewed Scarface he had said, in Thai, 'I don't know who killed her, maybe it was ghosts'. His creepy response mystified me, and I suspected he knew more than he let on.

Somchai had found Jor Min hiding in Ban Muang Paem, a Karen village six kilometres from Ban Tham Lod. The police interrogated him for three days until he admitted to his involvement in the crime and agreed to identify his accomplices. According to Somchai, Jor Min said Toon had ordered him to stay away from our village after the murder and keep his mouth shut. The statements Jor Min and the other suspects gave to the police were, in my

mind, contentious, and I wasn't sure if they had perverted the truth to make themselves look less guilty.

Jor Min alleged that Ewa had given him money to buy her some heroin, and he had walked to Ban Wanna Luang, a Red Lahu village near Soppong, to get it. Jor Min said he was with Toon, Suk and Ngern when he had arranged to meet Ewa again. He claimed he gave her some heroin to smoke in a cigarette, but she said she didn't feel anything, so he offered to inject some into her arm. He tried twisting her sleeve but couldn't find a vein so two of the others held her upper arm tight. Almost immediately after giving her a shot, Ewa lost consciousness. They were afraid she had overdosed and would die, so they carried her to the streambed where they would not meet any people while she recovered. There, according to Jor Min, Toon and the two others took turns to rape her while he watched from a distance. Toon then strangled her with a vine and made sure she was dead by tightening her shoelace around her neck.

The police had already theorised that Ewa had agreed to use heroin, because there was no evidence of a struggle. Suk and Ngern also maintained she had asked Jor Min to inject her. This however, contradicted what Peter had told me. He said Ewa avoided all drugs, including aspirin and birth-control pills, and would not have allowed anyone to stick a needle into her arm. I also doubted she would let a creepy-looking Shan junkie like Jor Min inject a syringe full of smack, mixed with river water, into her vein. Jor Min had lost one eye when he fought as a rebel soldier in Burma. He sported filthy long hair and wore unwashed torn clothing. Ewa would have been aware of the danger of HIV and hepatitis viruses contaminating his well-used needle. Somchai later told me that Jor Min carried three needles, including an unused one, and he could have sterilised the water from the Nam Lang by boiling it in a spoon over a candle.

The Australian government had granted Ewa, one of Australia's most promising young theatre directors, a prestigious scholarship to further her studies in Poland, the birthplace of her parents. She had travelled to Thailand on her way to Poland with Peter, her steady boyfriend of eight years. I didn't know her, but I doubted she was the sort of person who



would jeopardise a bright future with a hit of heroin, or casual sex with strangers, in the jungles of northern Thailand.

Apart from his appearance, Jor Min was a pleasant character, and spoke good English. In 1986 I had employed him as a porter on one of John Dunkley's expeditions, and the Australian cavers liked his gentle manners. They expressed disbelief when I told them the police had arrested him as an accessory to a murder.

Jor Min vanished after his confession. The notorious reputation of the Thai police for 'disposing' of criminals on their blacklist led to mixed speculation on his fate. Some locals theorised that Jor Min had returned to Burma, floating down the Mae Nam Pai without a raft. Another rumour alleged a deep sinkhole next to the highway contained the battered remains of captured villains, mixed with the bodies of destitute illegal immigrants who had perished in the local hospital. I had also heard that the retreating Japanese army had dumped heavy weapons, and war booty, into the same pit. My curiosity impelled me to abseil into the hole with caver friends. We found no bones, guns or gold.

Soon after the police had detained Jor Min, Toon fled to Burma. Our police bodyguards left, but we kept our weapons handy. Nothing serious happened for months until one morning, Diew's younger sister Doi, who managed Wilderness, rode her motorbike to Cave Lodge and told us a man had raped a guest in one of the bungalows, and Somchai needed me to translate. Bloody hell – the onslaught continued! No wonder the police purged suspects to maintain a semblance of law and order.

A distraught young German couple sat on a bench near the stairs of the police station. The police didn't believe their story and said no Thai man would stand by while another man raped his wife. I talked to the couple, and immediately believed their disturbing account.

A man brandishing a big knife had broken into their room the previous night and forced the German man into an adjacent bungalow. The woman thought compliance was the safest option. She also hoped she could avoid assault by showing the man she had her period. He didn't care. At intervals, the attacker went next door and threatened her husband with the knife. The woman told her partner not to intervene and risk their lives. When the rapist ran

away, he took their money and a pair of shoes. The couple then roused Doi, who stayed in a hut nearby. She slept with a pistol by her pillow and had no compunction using it to shoot an intruder, especially if he didn't have a gun. She told the couple, 'You should have called out. I would have shot him dead.'

Within days, the police identified the culprit as Pang, a local Shan who had recently finished serving a gaol sentence for rape. Shortly after the rape of the German woman, Pang acquired a gun, held up a village store and raped a Lahu woman. The Mae Hong Son police assigned a special plainclothes squad to track him down.

They called at the lodge and asked us to offer a reward for the capture of the rapist. We promised we would give them 5,000 baht.

The team chased Pang in the border hills, staked out his village, fired shots at him and almost nabbed him on a number of occasions. Months after the initial assault, they cornered him in a rice-field hut near the border. According to the cops, he refused to surrender. Pang fired at them, and they gunned him down.

The police turned up to collect their reward ('Err, we said capture, not kill.') and we handed out beer. They looked like gangsters. The leader tied his long hair with a black headband and wore jeans and a camouflage jacket. He carried his unholstered .45 calibre handgun in his belt, behind his back.

The successful hunt delighted the team, and they related to us their version of the shoot-out. They downed glasses of beer and confided they had pulled down Pang's trousers and found ground balls of glass under the skin on the shaft of his penis. The cops said this is a common practice in Thai prisons, as the glass balls heighten a partner's pleasure. We cringed at their personal touch. We didn't need any information on the rapist's penis! Handing our hard-earned money to the suspect elimination squad left us with a tinge of guilt by association. We were glad nobody solicited a contribution to the 'capture-Toon' reward.

Toon had crossed into Burma to elude arrest, but the Pang Mapha police requested that troops from Khun Sa's Shan United Army seize him. The Shan soldiers delivered Toon to the border near Ban Huai Hea. Somchai, a frequent visitor at the lodge, was standing on our front

veranda when he received the news on his walkie-talkie. He turned to face Diew and me, and smiled.

‘We’ve caught Toon’, he said, while maintaining his inscrutable facade. ‘How do you want him – dead or alive?’

The question stunned us. Somchai was always hard to read, but we hoped he was kidding this time. We despised Toon, but preferred to see legitimate justice determine his fate. The chief turned and talked into his radio.

Shan villagers in Ban Mae Lana watched the local police force Toon, in handcuffs, into the back of a 4WD pickup. He died on the way to Soppong, somewhere along the deserted, 15-kilometre road that snakes through the karst. The police said they shot him when he grabbed a gun and attempted to escape.

Maybe the police had honoured a translated promise when they eliminated Toon, but they had also blasted away any chance of removing the shroud of uncertainty that obscured the truth of what happened near the cave on 3 January 1988. Regardless of whether he was guilty of rape and murder, Toon deserved a fair and open trial, not three .38 bullets.

Scarface’s brother and employee received long gaol sentences. His relatives believed, and continue to maintain, that Toon did not murder Ewa. They removed the police bullets and buried his body near the meditation monastery instead of cremating it, in case future investigators needed to exhume his skull. The Thai Lawyers Association helped Toon’s wife win a drawn-out court case that sought compensation for her husband’s death. Somchai received a promotion and moved to another province.

What really happened to Jor Min remained a well-kept secret until almost 20 years after the murder. In May 2007 Somchai visited me and revealed that after Jor Min had identified the rapists and the murderer, he had taken him to Tak Province where he worked on a cattle farm until he died from AIDS in 2004. I took the opportunity to ask Somchai, who had risen to a high rank in the police force, why he had tried to arrest me after he found my blanket near the cave. He laughed and said the commander from Mae Hong Son had insisted on it, and he had no choice in the matter.

# FIRES AND FLOODS

**R**ape, murder, asphyxiation, psychosis, cave accidents, rafting disasters and broken bones beleaguered us for three frantic years.

With Toon dead, I thought a semblance of normality would return, but the tremors rumbled on and continued to shake us. Diew and I fought back when we could.

Every catastrophe shook me, but none with the same force as the fire that engulfed our house in June 1990.

I had constructed our buildings with natural materials, all flammable. In 1990 leaf tiles on bamboo rafters roofed Cave Lodge, split bamboo on bamboo supports formed the floors, and woven bamboo mats covered the walls.

No piped water flowed into our village back then. We cooked with firewood, had an open fireplace with no chimney in the front room, and used kerosene pressure lanterns and candles for light. No insurance company would cover our house and possessions. I knew if the lodge ever caught fire, we could lose it all. Once flames flare into a leaf roof, they can raze a building like ours in minutes.

At the height of the dry season, snaking fronts of flame scorch the hills and char the leaf litter and tinder-dry undergrowth on the forest floor. Thick smoke turns the midday sun the colour of a monk's robe. At this time of the year, the temperature hovers in the 40s, and we remain on high alert. Our paranoia intensifies when strong daytime winds fan the flames, and flecks of glowing ash float in the haze.

One year, in the parched month of March, a fire devastated Ban Wanna Luang, the Red Lahu village between the lodge and Soppong. While their houses burned, the adults were paying respect to the elders in a neighbouring village at the end of the Lahu New Year. Their



children had been playing with fire, and the flames had leapt onto the roof of a hut. Within 15 minutes, the conflagration had spread to 42 houses. The blaze reduced the village to ashes, and the affected families lost everything they owned.

Monsoons bring heavy rain to northern Thailand in late May, and the flow of tourists drops to a trickle. The forest comes alive with a profusion of accelerated growth that fills the spaces between trees, and carpets the blackened forest floor.

I sleep through most nights without waking, but at four o'clock one morning in June 1990 I drifted in and out of semi-consciousness. Diew, seven months pregnant with our second child, tossed and turned next to me. Our mosquito net trapped the moisture-laden air, and a shrill din of cicadas in the forest rose and fell in waves. In the background, a constant ratchet-like racket of crickets competed with the loud quadraphonic croaking of frogs in the valley. Our bedroom sounded like an industrial workshop. I closed my eyes, oblivious to the nocturnal noises of nature. All of a sudden, Diew sat up and nudged me. 'Somebody's coming. I can hear a jeep.'

Israeli tourists often arrived in rented jeeps from Chiang Mai at odd hours, but they never came this late. I heard an unfamiliar rumbling noise. Diew said, 'I can see headlights'. I was not fully awake, and everything seemed a little vague. No way was I going to get out of bed and show a bunch of Israelis a room at this time of the morning.

A loud, unmistakable blast shook me out of my stupor. When bamboo poles burn, the air inside each chamber expands and explodes like a firecracker. We used bamboo poles as rafters and floor supports. Our house was on fire!

Naked, I leapt out of bed, opened the door, and saw a wall of flames in our oven room. More bamboo burst apart. I ran outside, dragging on pants and shouting 'Fire!' The roar of flaming bamboo and the hiss of wood sap eclipsed the cicadas. I raced into the kitchen, kicked a locked door off its hinges, and hurled a big pot of water into the fire. It flared up higher and scorched holes in the leaf roof. The flames soared onto the roof of a hut where Nung, Toon and Mai, our teenage staff from Ban Tham Lod, were sleeping. We shouted and woke the girls, then yelled out to two Italians who were staying in a dormitory connected to

the main house.

Nung and Mai fled their burning room without their belongings. Toon, a refugee from Burma, gathered all her clothes. When Toon was a young girl, Nung told me later, Shan soldiers had attacked a Burmese army outpost in her Shan State village late one night. Everyone had panicked except Toon, who grabbed a blanket and a bundle of clothes before she fled into the forest. I told the girls to run into the village and alert our neighbours.

I dashed into the kitchen, climbed up on a bench and tore off unburnt roof tiles with my hands to create a firebreak. My four-year-old daughter, Mindy, appeared below me and said, 'Daddy, I see a star'. I shouted to Diew to take her out of danger.

Within minutes, 30 or 40 Shan from the village arrived, and our Italian guests joined them in fighting the flames. The lodge's water supply came from a well in the valley, and we pumped the water up to a single concrete tank behind the kitchen. Dave, who had helped Paco and I build the lodge, had laid PVC pipes from the tank to the kitchen and bathrooms. People started filling buckets from taps outside a bathroom, but each one took a minute or more – too slow to beat the fire.

The roof tiles on the girls' room blazed and crackled, and more rafters exploded. The room beneath their sleeping quarters stored dry food, cooking oil, plastic hoses, PVC pipes, paint and a full 18-litre tin of kerosene for our lanterns. I sprinted down the hill to the well and yanked the starter cord on the old petrol engine that ran our piston pump. Carbon had clogged the spark plug, and it took more than 20 tugs before it fired up. My heart was pumping faster than the engine as I raced back up the steep steps.

The extreme heat had melted the plastic hose connected to the tank, and less than four metres drooped out of the tap. I started squirting. Men from our village had climbed onto the high roof of the main house and were ripping off leaf tiles to slow the fire's spread.

The fire swept onto the roof of the carport where I had parked our new pickup. The Land Rover blocked the way out. I handed someone the remains of the hose, grabbed the keys and jumped in the rover. To start the old diesel I had to warm up the glow plugs, which takes a minute or two. The lid blew on the kerosene tin in the storeroom, and an awesome 20-metre

jet of super-heated fire spurted from the restricted hole like a pyrotechnic geyser. I reversed the rover to the gate, jumped out, and let it roll into a tree to stop. I backed the pickup out of danger.

The sounds of the battle intensified. The ignited kerosene was erupting out of the tin with a volcanic roar, bamboo was blasting open like bullets tossed on a bonfire, and people were hollering in various languages. When water doused the flames, the red-hot coals and ash sizzled and sputtered. In the background, the noise of the insects and frogs continued unabated.

The main house caught fire and more commotion broke out. The Shan were gesturing and yelling, telling us to throw our stuff out of our room. They said it was too late to save the lodge.

Diew, heavily pregnant, went back to our room and began tossing our belongings off the balcony into the bush. I grabbed the hose and sprayed the crackling line of fire on the roof. The leaf tiles on our carport and a stack of teak planks in an adjacent hut flared with a dazzling intensity against the black sky and lit the forest a shimmering yellow. The blistering heat scorched the trees near the hut and incinerated leaves.

Four Israelis had arrived the day before in a rented jeep from Chiang Mai, and had parked it next to the main house. They slept in a bungalow down the hill, and nobody had roused them when the fire broke out. Their jeep was about to melt, or burst into flames. I told Toon to wake them. One of the group came up, backed the jeep up the hill and then went back to sleep. His total disinterest in the spectacular inferno that was engulfing the place he was staying in stupefied me. At least he could have taken a photo or invited his friends to view the bonfire.

The fire fighters, stoked on an overdose of adrenaline, fought the blaze for an hour or more and, to everyone's relief, we saved the main house and extinguished the flames. When it was out, the fear-fuelled hormones drained from my body. My gut stayed tight, but I felt emotionally empty. I am sure if we had lost everything, my tears would have fizzled into the ashes of my house. I sat next to the scorched debris and waited until sunrise to inspect the

damage.

If the fire had been in the dry season, or on a hot day, the outcome would have been disastrous. A light drizzle had fallen before the blaze started, and the damp roof and still night air had saved our guesthouse from total destruction.

The fire was my fault. I had constructed our oven from two 200-litre iron barrels, one inside the other, and set them above a layer of bricks in a wooden box of packed clay. The heat from baking our bread, cakes, pizzas and roast dinners had caused the clay base to fracture. Hot ash had worked its way into the cracks and burnt through the box. Coals had dropped beneath the oven to a stack of firewood and bundles of resinous pinewood. The fresh amber-coloured wood from the lowest parts of the Himalayan Pine burns like hot wax, and we use it for lighting fires.

When I built a new kitchen and ovens, I constructed a base that was fireproof down to the earth's mantle. I also redesigned the fireplace in the centre of our main house. The original hill tribe-style dirt-box fireplace was another potential flash point. I replaced it with a mound of dirt, two-metres thick, down to the ground.

We have fought more fires since the big blaze. My son Shane was born in 1990, and maybe his experience in the womb had transformed him into a budding pyromaniac. When he was four, he took a burning piece of wood from our new oven and set our roof on fire. This time we squeezed off a couple of extinguishers and suffocated the flames. Shane now says his earliest memory is watching the fire spread from his burning stick onto the dry leaves.

On one hot windy day, a leaf roof on a bathroom caught fire. I had used another old oil barrel to heat water for our guests' bucket baths. A gust blew sparks from the fire under the drum onto the adjacent roof. Two extinguishers failed to quell the blaze, and we had to climb and chop down an ignited stand of bamboo next to the bathroom to prevent the flames leaping to our house.

The latest fire struck as another early morning freak-out, and this time it was not my fault. I was sleeping with my second wife, Nung, a Shan from Ban Tham Lod. More than 10 years earlier, Nung had slept above the tin of kerosene while the roof of her bedroom burned, and



she remains paranoid about being trapped in a fire. She woke me with the worst 'F' word I know – 'Fire!' One of our guests was shouting it repeatedly, and an orange glow lit up our glass-fronted bedroom.

Nung and I had been together for a couple of years after Diew and I divorced. I had shared 18 eventful and fulfilling years with Diew, but she longed for a change. She was tired of catering to the whims of tourists and yearned for more freedom to live as she pleased. Diew moved back to Chiang Mai and established the successful THC rooftop bar. I gained custody of our children and continued to run the lodge. Less than a year after our divorce, I joined Nung in a Shan-style blessing ceremony, and white cotton threads bound my wrists for a second time. Nung's parents, her son Oh-O, Mindy, Shane and a few friends attended the simple civil wedding in Nung's house in Ban Tham Lod. I have known Nung since my first trek to her village, when I stayed in her family home. She was married for a couple of years to one of Diew's nephews, Eak, a trekking guide who died from colon cancer in 2007 when he was 34. Diew and Nung know each other well, and we all remain friends. Wat, our senior guide, who has helped us through every adversity, is Diew's brother and the grandfather of Nung's son.

Every fire hits me with an initial blast of instantaneous gut-tightening terror, but I somehow managed to keep it together. In the flare from the blaze, I pulled on my pants, dashed out of the room and flicked the main breaker on our electricity supply. I woke up Boo, one of our guides, and we both grabbed extinguishers.

Bungalow 14, one of our originals with a leaf roof and bamboo walls and floors, was a fireball. Bungalows 13 and 15, both within two metres of the flames, were ready to join it. We fired off the extinguishers and the fire slowed for 15 seconds before flaring again. I shouted to our staff and the guests in Bungalows 13 and 15 to bring buckets of water. I yelled again to find out if the occupants of the room had fled in time. The ferocity of the blaze made it hard to tell.

They had escaped, unharmed, and were hugging each other on the grass slope above the bungalow. They watched in awe as the flaming hut they had ignited lit up the hillside.

I glanced up the hill and, in the firelight, saw a Spanish girl from Bungalow 15 standing naked except for a sarong draped across her shoulders. She stood motionless, staring into the flames. This striking image of unself-conscious nudity in the midst of bedlam struck me as so hauntingly beautiful that I stopped for a brief moment and ignored the fire. It turned out she was the person who had mustered the state of mind to alert us.

We threw water on the adjacent bungalows, but it was too late to save Bungalow 14. The fire drew more wide-eyed guests. They formed a line and passed buckets of water from 200-litre drums on the veranda of the main house that we keep full for fighting fires. People from our village arrived to help, Boo dragged in a hose and we soon extinguished the flames.

The American–Thai couple staying in Bungalow 14 admitted they had left a candle burning by their mosquito net when they retired. The blazing hot wall of their hut had woken them. Too speechless to raise the alarm, they had grabbed their gear and fled. The guests in Bungalows 13 and 15 told me that at first they thought their neighbours were enjoying loud sex. Then the din intensified, and they felt the heat and saw the flames.

The couple, English teachers in Hong Kong, was apologetic. They said they had seen the sign in their bungalow that banned candles, incense, mosquito coils and smoking inside the room. They promised to send money to pay for the hut, and I agreed not to inform the police. Their acceptance of full responsibility, and their honesty, boosted my optimism in human decency. The money the couple sent us helped pay for an upgraded, less flammable bungalow.

I still fear that drifting ash from a forest fire, a cigarette butt or an electrical fault will raze the lodge one day. When the first rains arrive my paranoia diminishes, but as the monsoons set in and the rivers rise there are other things to lose sleep over.

One early morning in June 2004, exceedingly heavy rain thundered on our leaf roof and filled the Nam Lang to dramatically high levels. The river had reached this height once in living memory, 33 years before, when it inundated the village of the original Shan settlers. Diew and I had built Cave Lodge on a slope above the river because the locals had warned us of the periodic flash floods. Scarface had disregarded similar advice and established his River Lodge on the riverbank downstream from our lodge.

The Thai man who was renting Scarface's guesthouse in 2004 woke to the roar of the swollen river tearing bungalows off the bank, seconds before water gushed inside his bedroom. He escaped by swimming through a swirling neck-deep torrent in the guesthouse kitchen. The place had no other guests, which was a relief. In the pre-dawn darkness, the floodwaters swept his uninsured, one-year-old pickup into the main flow. Outside the cave it smashed through a sturdy concrete bridge our village had built for monks to access the forest monastery. The flood thrust the vehicle through the cave and over a dam, another kilometre downstream, until it caught on a boulder. The locals joked that the pulverized pickup only made it that far because it was a 4WD.

A rejuvenated forest on our land upstream from the riverside guesthouse saved it from total destruction. The trees caught logs that could have swept all the buildings underground. The flood didn't damage the cave, but further downstream it destroyed dams and other structures near the banks of the Nam Lang.

In August and September 2005 two bigger floods destroyed the rebuilt bungalows. The first one caused widespread damage and killed many people in the district. A staggering six-metre-high wall of water, logs, bamboo and mud slammed into the centre of Ban Nam Rin, a Lisu village near Soppong, at six in the morning. The villagers told me it sounded like an aeroplane landing. They had lived there for 47 years, and the tiny stream dividing their village had never overflowed its banks. The flash flood sheared 11 houses off their foundations and took 10 lives.

Unprecedented downpours on the high mountains south of Muang Pai on that wet August night transformed another tiny mountain stream, the Nam Hoo, into a torrent of mud and debris that blasted away houses, bridges and the market area. The engorged Mae Nam Pai dragged guesthouse bungalows, cars, motorbikes, refrigerators, washing machines, farm animals and a few people downstream.

The deluge scoured the valleys and demolished three sturdy concrete bridges that spanned minor streams on the road to Pang Mapha. Landslides scarred the high slopes and cut the road near Kiew Lom.

A month later, rivers in Pang Mapha rose to even higher levels and caused more destruction

in our district. The Shan in Ban Mae Lana watched in dismay as the small stream in the centre of their village breached its banks and washed away property and houses. The sinkholes in the valley floor couldn't cope with the immense volume of water. The stream backed up and ruined acres of irrigated rice fields that the community depended on for their livelihood.

The run-off poured into holes in the earth, and many caves in the region filled to the roof. In Tham Lod the Nam Lang flowed with enough force to snap stalactites that dangled more than 10 metres above the normal river level. When the waters receded, I paddled a kayak through the cave and counted 15 broken stalactites. The damage to these ancient formations, some thicker than an elephant's leg, indicated that the Nam Lang had risen to its highest level in hundreds or possibly thousands of years.

When a flash flood fills a cave, there is nowhere to run. I once led the Pang Mapha District Officer and the head of the Nature Education Station at Tham Lod on a dry season trip into Tham Mae Lana. We had reached a flowstone waterfall, three kilometres from the entrance, when the cave's stream suddenly changed colour and began rising. The District Officer lost his balance as we tried to cross the swift water and reach a higher bank, and the current dragged him downstream. We pulled him out, seconds before the deluge sucked him beneath the flowstone sump. The freak downpour in the cave catchment was shortlived, and the stream soon dropped to a safe level. I now avoid stream caves if there is any possibility of rain.

The day after the 2005 flood, I stood in Ban Nam Rin on a scoured concrete slab, all that was left of a Lisu family's house, and tried to imagine the grief of the survivors who had lost family, friends and everything they owned. I had never had to deal with such total devastation. After the inferno at Cave Lodge, I had consoled myself by focusing on what we were able to save, rather than the material possessions we had lost. But late one night, a year after the 1990 house fire, an unexpected incident wrenched my understanding of anguish into another realm.



# CLOSE TO THE EDGE

**D**iew and I were sleeping soundly in our small room with our newborn son, Shane, as rain pattered on the roof. Our five-year-old daughter slept on her own bed next to ours. I woke to an unfamiliar shaking sensation. I beamed a torch through Mindy's mosquito net and saw her frail body buckling with shuddering waves. I woke Diew and leapt out of bed. Mindy was unconscious, but her eyes were rolling in their sockets. Diew and I looked on in alarm, unsure of how to deal with such a serious condition. We had to get her to a doctor, fast.

The monsoon was well under way. Two days earlier, a flood had swept away the approach to the bridge over the Nam Lang and severed our road access to the outside world. Our village depended on the link as much as we did, and I had helped the villagers drag trees from the forest and bridge the 10-metre gap. Two rows of logs lay in place that morning, but the river was rising again.

The nearest hospital was in Muang Pai, 50 kilometres away, but a small clinic with a nurse operated in Soppong, which was 15 minutes by car.

Mindy's convulsions from her spontaneous seizure were unremitting as we lifted her into the front of our pickup truck. As I drove out of Cave Lodge, the storm intensified and sheets of rain pounded the windscreen of the pickup. I cut the corners on the slippery narrow road and redlined the engine before changing into higher gears. At the bridge, I slowed to cross the logs over the raging river.

No lights shone in the clinic. I drove to a two-storey teak house where the nurse slept and shouted for help. When she appeared, I pleaded with her to hurry down.

I asked the nurse to radio Pai Hospital and consult a doctor. She told me the storm had

knocked out the town's electricity, and the clinic's generator wasn't working. Worse, the car battery that backed up the radio transmitter was flat.

My daughter, in the grip of an acute seizure, lay in the car. Rain was teeming down. I was desperate. I revved the Toyota, drove it hard up the steps of the clinic, and hooked up jumper leads from my battery to the dead one.

The nurse radioed the doctor on duty in Pai, and I described the severity of the ongoing seizure. He told the nurse to administer intravenous Valium. He said we must rush Mindy to the hospital in Pai, as fast as possible.

The nurse agreed to join us. She cradled Mindy in the cramped back seat of the pickup's cab and syringed saliva from her mouth to stop her from drowning. I drove at top speed, screaming the engine, screeching tires and skidding on the curves. The torrential rain was unrelenting and low clouds misted the higher slopes near Kiew Lom. I focused on staying on the bitumen and trying not to slide off on the tight bends. I flashed the emergency lights and used the entire road.

Approaching Pai, I saw the lights of a forestry checkpoint and a uniformed officer with a shotgun standing in the middle of the wet road. I was driving in a high-velocity panic, in a frantic bid to save my daughter's life. I flicked my high beam and thumped the horn. I thought he'd move, but he held his position. I jammed my foot on the brake and the pickup started to fishtail. I pressed the accelerator, the guard jumped off the road, and I shouted 'Hospital!' as I skidded by.

I drove the 40 kilometres from Soppong to Pai, a trip that takes an hour on a dry road, in 35 minutes. I sped into the hospital grounds. Nurses were waiting for us with a stretcher outside Emergency, and they rushed Mindy inside.

Diew waited outside, as I stood by Mindy, watching her slip away from me. I fought to hold back my tears as I begged the doctor to save our daughter's life. He injected more Valium and inserted a tube down Mindy's windpipe to drain her lungs. The nurses and doctor looked concerned. The doctor glanced at me and then told a nurse to 'Get the father out'. I broke down; tears flowed down my cheeks, and I refused to leave. If Mindy was not going to make

it, I would be with her to the last second.

Mindy's breathing stopped. I pleaded with the doctor to do everything, anything. He ignored me, placed a mask on her face, and pumped in air. I watched in anguish as my daughter teetered on the brink. Unable to do anything except cry, I felt powerless. I resigned myself to staring at her lifeless small body, looking for any signs of recovery, refusing to believe I had lost her.

The doctor kept pumping air and sucking liquid from her lungs. Mindy started twitching. Her lungs began to draw in air. I sobbed quietly with relief when the doctor removed the mask and let her breathe alone.

Her constant seizures continued for another hour and then she seemed to stabilise. She remained unconscious, but the doctor said she might relapse. He thought she would survive, but wouldn't predict the effects of the extended seizure on her brain. He advised us to move her to Chiang Mai that night. I implored him to accompany us in the Pai Hospital ambulance.

The doctor taped up Mindy's mouth with a breathing tube. Another smaller hose connected to the pump that drained her lungs. Her mild convulsions persisted as we drove out of Pai.

Forty minutes out of town, we slowed down at Mae Ya. I had transported Ian, Kerry, Nit, Paul and other people in my makeshift ambulances past this checkpoint. In 1988 the police here had told us a farang had died at Tham Lod, and we had disbelieved them. I looked at my daughter on the ambulance bed. The doctor said she would live.

The police waved us on. Then, as the ambulance moved away from the spotlights, Mindy opened her eyes. We tore off the bandages plastering her mouth. She looked around, asked where she was, and said she was cold. She then lapsed into a deep sleep while we hugged her and kept her warm.

Mindy woke again in Lanna Hospital, the place where she was born. She looked drowsy after her massive infusion of Valium, but she was talking. She remembered going to bed in our room at the lodge, and waking in the ambulance, but nothing else. The doctors took her away for an electroencephalogram (EEG).

After midday, the paediatrician walked into the ward and informed us that Mindy suffered

from epilepsy. She gave me a prescription for medication from the pharmacy downstairs and said we could take her home.

The casual way the doctor had informed us of Mindy's condition, and the miniscule amount of information she offered, appalled me. I suspected she lacked the appropriate qualifications to provide us with a better interpretation.

I went straight to the hospital's library and consulted thick medical textbooks. I learnt that the majority of epileptic seizures end in less than 10 minutes. Mindy's seizure had persisted for two hours, which was rare, and the severity of it could have damaged her brain. According to the textbook, doctors should diagnose epilepsy in a patient only after two or more seizures. I also read that the addictive barbiturates Mindy's doctor had prescribed were outdated. New drugs with less severe side-effects had replaced them in treating epilepsy more than 20 years ago.

I asked the paediatrician for the name of the person who had read the EEG results and diagnosed epilepsy. She gave me the name and the address of a neurologist in Chiang Mai.

The neurologist had studied in England, and her credentials and professional approach impressed us. She changed Mindy's medication and then discussed her symptoms with us in detail. She advised us to have her brain checked with a CAT scan, because in rare cases the pork tapeworm lays eggs in the brain, eyes or muscles of people who eat raw or under-cooked pork. When tapeworm cysts lodge in the brain, they can cause severe seizures.

We took Mindy to a clinic and watched as the staff eased her tiny frame inside the scanner, the same cylindrical machine that had scanned the brains of both Kerry and Ian for blood clots. We hoped it could determine whether a worm had deposited eggs inside our daughter's skull, or if there was any other abnormality.

The images revealed that the neurologist's hunch was right. A tapeworm had penetrated Mindy's head, and the cysts were visible in her brain.

Our despair was tinged with guilt. Diew and I were aware of the dangers of parasites and always cooked our meat well, but had we inadvertently fed Mindy tainted pork? Maybe fermented Chiang Mai sausage was the source of the tapeworm eggs. Mindy liked to eat this



northern delicacy with sticky rice.

We took Mindy for more scans to establish if the cysts were alive and growing. The results showed they were. The neurologist said the best way to kill the active cysts was for Mindy to undergo treatment with a course of powerful drugs. She would have to spend up to two weeks in hospital while doctors administered the drugs and monitored her reactions, as the treatment could trigger more seizures.

Mindy's condition distressed my mother. She had stayed with us when her newborn granddaughter lay in an incubator in Lanna Hospital. The doctors had given Mindy barium for her first meal, and x-rays had revealed she had a collapsed lung. Now Mindy was suffering from a life-threatening condition that was rare in developed countries. My mother conducted intensive research on the latest treatment for tapeworm cysts in the brain.

She confirmed that our neurologist had recommended a widely approved strategy, which boosted our hopes for a successful outcome. The Thai neurologist convened a meeting with the senior doctors in Suan Dork Hospital, where they reviewed the seminar papers and related material my mother had sent from Australia. Together, they decided on an appropriate procedure for eliminating the active cysts. When we admitted Mindy into Suan Dork for her extended stay, we were convinced she would receive the finest level of professional care.

The doctors performed painful spinal taps and kept her in hospital for 10 days. The harsh treatment killed the cysts, but another scan showed calcified remnants remained in her brain. She continued taking prophylactic drugs for three years to suppress any seizures, and for many more years we carried Valium with us everywhere.

Mindy never had another seizure and she matured into a talented young woman. Before she finished her Thai high school in Chiang Mai, she spent 10 months in a school near Lisbon, where she lived with a generous and caring Portuguese family. She speaks Northern Thai, her mother tongue, and Central Thai, the language of instruction in school. She also learnt Shan from our village, English from her dad and Cave Lodge guests, Portuguese and French in high school, and has studied Chinese in Australia. She is now studying Anthropology in Canberra.

I will never forget, and remain deeply indebted to, the nurse in the Soppong clinic, the doctor and nurses in Pai Hospital who saved Mindy's life, and our neurologist in Chiang Mai who treated her for three years.

# OVERDOSE

The difference between life and death in the Golden Triangle can be as small as a pinch of heroin or a smidgen of sizzling opium. When I first arrived in Chiang Mai I stayed in the dormitory of Je T'aime Guesthouse. When one of the other guests didn't come out of the shared bathroom, I helped break the door and found him sprawled on the floor with a needle stuck in his arm. He survived, but since then I have seen two fatal overdoses.

Soon after we settled into our mountain home, the Soppong police asked me to take a corpse to the Mae Hong Son morgue. The police station's pickup had mechanical problems and, not surprisingly, the police couldn't find anyone else to transport the body. They also expected me to help because the deceased was a farang.

The police said the American had trekked in our district with a Chiang Mai guide. He had smoked opium in a Lahu village and died in his sleep. The other trekkers and their guide had left the Lahu to deal with the corpse.

Opium users develop a tolerance that allows them to smoke 50 or more pipes with little risk to their wellbeing. A person with no tolerance throws up the contents of their stomach after smoking less than 10 pipes. The American was probably flat on his back on the floor of a Lahu house, floating in dreamland, when he choked on his dinner.

The police had wrapped the body in a tarp, and I helped lift it into the back of my rover. The return trip would be in the dark, so I took a Thai youth, who had started working at Cave Lodge the previous day, along for company. When we hit the rough road out of town, an arm worked loose from the tarp and flopped back and forth. My companion leaned forward in his seat and cringed each time he glanced over his shoulder. He quit the next day.

Many young foreigners were experimenting with opium in the hills. It was unavailable elsewhere, they figured, so they could binge in the Golden Triangle and not develop a permanent habit. The hill tribe addicts liked the business. They bought a small ball of raw opium for 20 baht and cut it with enough scrapings out of their pipe and aspirin powder to make 20 pipes, which they sold for 20 baht each to farang.

On our treks it was impossible to avoid staying in houses where people smoked opium, and the sap-scented smoke drifting from the addicts' pipes became very familiar. The sweet smell was inviting, but I resisted the urge to lie down and partake. When I was still at school, I decided that the surest way to avoid addiction to a drug was to never sample it. I imagined an opium high would be enjoyable – almost everyone who smoked it said it induced a blissful state of detachment – but I was unsure whether I would have had the willpower to resist using it again. The region I lived in supplied the majority of the world's opiates. It was cheap, pure and everywhere, and I dared not try one puff. I didn't want to end up like one of the junkies I knew so well in my Chiang Mai guesthouse.

If our trekkers wanted to smoke opium, I sometimes tempered their curiosity by asking if they would tongue-kiss the dirtiest, red-saliva-drooling addict I could spot in the village. The surprised trekkers usually just gawked at me. My stock response was, 'If you wrap your lips around his soggy pipe, you might as well. You can hear his spit gurgling in it as you suck.' Not to mention tuberculosis, hepatitis, herpes and other ailments his bubbling juices might carry.

Other trekking guides were willing to provide their clients with whatever they desired and thought offering them opium was a good idea. A remark such as 'It was a cool trek, man. We smoked "O" with the shaman' was excellent advertising for their trekking business.

In the 1970s and 80s travellers could inflate their egos with a casual brag about any amazing or exclusive experience. 'We stayed in a village where nobody goes', was a common boast, with 'nobody' meaning no other trekking companies. One couple told me they had visited a town and 'there were no other people there'.

Some guides shared pipes regularly. Like most new narcotic users, they would deny their addiction and insist they could quit at any time. They only acknowledged their problem after



they had tried, and failed, to kick their habit three or four times.

Opium-smoking guides needed a fix back in the town while they waited for their next trekking group. Opium is a time-consuming hassle to smoke and its distinctive smell can attract attention. Many guides upgraded to the ultimate cure for opium addiction – 94 per cent pure Golden Triangle heroin. The white powder was available, odour-free and ready to use.

I watched with despair as three of our trekking guides at the lodge, and other guides I knew, wasted themselves down the smack drain. Heroin swept them into the cesspit of a wretched subsistence where they battled, every day, to maintain their crippling habits. All were smart, confident and outgoing young men who succumbed in the prime of their lives and trashed a secure future as English-speaking guides working in the tourist industry. I had lived with hill tribe opium smokers, hooked on the same basic ingredient, who led relatively normal lives. They grew poppy and retained the support of their families and community. Our guides were alone, and their society ostracised them. Heroin's illegality and its high street price hastened their rapid demise.

I encouraged them to stop, but it was like trying to convince a born-again fanatic to abandon religion. Years later, when they realised they had wasted their past and compromised their future, they pulled out the needle for the last time and strived to rebuild their shattered lives. They said the desire to stick it back in never left them.

The American tourist was not the last overdose victim we had to deal with. On Christmas Day one year, an Italian couple in their mid-20s arrived at the lodge. I sent them to Bungalow 11 and invited them to join in our Christmas feast that night. They declined, said they were tired, and stayed in their room. All the other guests at the lodge partied until late.

On Boxing Day I left the lodge early and joined Diew at Tham Lod where a television team was shooting a documentary on caves. A score of Thai TV crews had come to the lodge, and millions of viewers had watched me lead well-known presenters on underground adventures. I capitalised on the exposure by promoting cave conservation.

Filming had started when Wat, Diew's brother and one of our senior guides, sprinted into

the cave entrance. I had never seen Wat run, or look so distraught.

‘Farang dtai taem lao!’ he said in Kum Muang. ‘A farang has died again!’ Nerve currents pinched the back of my knees, and I braced myself on a stalagmite. Wat told us a woman lay dead in Bungalow 11.

Diew and I apologised to the director and hurried back to the lodge. I asked a police officer on duty at the forestry station to follow us.

Outside the bungalow, the Italian man sat on the path with his head between his knees. He was sobbing and moaning his girlfriend’s name. In the room, two Israeli guests were performing CPR, but the recipient looked lifeless. The young woman lay fully clothed on the bed. My staff told me the boyfriend had called out for help, and they had attempted to revive her with mouth-to-mouth resuscitation.

A range of reactions was welling up inside me, but anger erupted first. I walked up the path, told the cop to wait another moment and then confronted the boyfriend.

‘Do you have any heroin in the room?’

He answered in heavily accented English. ‘I dontta know how she die. She had the shower and come back the room and die.’ It had to be a lie – young people don’t drop dead from a cold shower. I put it to him that she had overdosed. He admitted they used heroin, but insisted she had not taken a hit that morning.

‘The police are coming now. Is the room clean?’ I didn’t want them to find drugs in the lodge and threaten another closure. Then again, I considered helping the police bust this man. Sharing my residence in Chiang Mai for seven years with society’s dregs and their junkie victims had left me with little sympathy for either dealers or users of heroin.

‘I throw eberything down there.’ He pointed near the bungalow. I told him to find it and throw it further into the bush. I was harsh – his girlfriend was dead, but I suspected he was to blame.

At the police station, he kept to his story. The police said they had seen the couple on the previous day buying heroin from Lahu dealers near Soppong, in the same village Stephane and Jor Min had used to score. The police had chased the Italians, but their motorbike was

too slow. The Italian man denied he had bought heroin in the village, but he did tell the police, as I interpreted, that his girlfriend had blacked out after they visited the Lahu village, insinuating she had a recent history of almost dying with no apparent cause. I suspected he was used to a European dealer's mix of powders that contained less than 20 per cent heroin. The purity of the Golden Triangle product far exceeded their tolerance levels, and he had given his girlfriend too much.

The Italian left Soppong and headed to Chiang Mai. The police felt sorry for him and didn't want to press charges or even search his room. They contacted his embassy and sent the body to Suan Dork for an autopsy. The results came back a week later. The pathologist established she had died from an overdose of heroin that had been injected into a vein in her neck. I doubted she could have self-administered her last shot.

Her boyfriend was too scared, and smacked out, to contact her parents. He changed all her travellers cheques, binged on powder in Chiang Mai, and finally shot up enough to join her.

When I heard the news of his death, I wondered whether he and his girlfriend would still be alive if I hadn't built the lodge. I had asked myself the same question after the death of Ewa. I sometimes have to tell myself not to dwell on such burdensome and pointless hypothetical uncertainties. In my first *Geo* magazine article, I wrote that hill tribe opium growers feel as responsible for heroin overdoses as tobacco growers do for lung cancer. I attempt to maintain the same level of detachment. But when the next guest died, he was on one of our caving tours, and indifference was not an option.

# LIFELINES

**V**ertical cavers put their lives on the line every time they dangle on a single nylon rope a centimetre in diameter. Razor-sharp limestone can slice an unprotected rope in seconds. If it rubs against blunt objects, it can fray. Friction can melt it.

Vertical cavers have to rely on their equipment and trust there will be no other problems, such as falling rocks, spirit attacks, poisonous air, or angry or greedy locals with knives.

The cause of vertical caving accidents can range from stupidity to misfortune. Cavers tie a knot in the end of their rope so they can't abseil off the end. If they forget, they can die. Other explorers have unhooked at the bottom of a pit and then watched their rope spring up out of reach. Smart people leave friends on top, or at least tell them where they are going.

Non-cavers ask me why I risk my life under the earth. I understand that they couldn't care less if fanatics extend the length of a hole in a rock, or find a new one. One enticement for vertical cavers in our area is that most of the deep pits remain unexplored. The last undiscovered places on our planet are underground, and cavers thrive on being the first people to visit and illuminate these unseen frontiers – places that might contain extraordinarily beautiful formations or shelter unique life forms. Another incentive for me is the chance, albeit slim, that one day I will drop onto six rotting crates marked with Japanese characters.

'Shit it's Big' is an 80-metre-deep bell-shaped pit that gained a name in 1986 when the first caver descended past its bottleneck opening. Ten years later I was crawling around in a nearby cave and found another way into the big hole. I invited some friends along to help explore the new route.

When I stand on the edge, ready to drop into a gaping cavity in the earth, involuntary shivers tingle through me. Once I start descending, I concentrate on each step down the face,



and forget my trepidation. We abseiled 60 metres of perpendicular wall to the base of Shit it's Big, then climbed down over breakdown to a stream that ended in a boulder choke. To save time on the way out, two people ascended the same rope together. When the last couple was on rope, the lead climber reached a small ledge and dislodged a large rock. He knew that if it dropped it would fall onto the second climber. He clung to the wall, held the rock against it with his leg and called to his partner, who was 30 metres below him, to come up fast. His leg swung away from the wall and released the rock the moment his friend made it to the ledge.

Another danger in some vertical caves in Pang Mapha is the accumulates of carbon dioxide in lower levels. Breathable air can change to deadly gas in the space of a few centimetres. If cavers descend too fast, they may not have enough time to ascend out of danger. When my friends and I drop into unknown depths, the leading person flicks a lighter every metre or so to pre-empt a disaster.

Rescuing the victims of cave accidents can be a daunting task. After Ian, one of our guests, had cracked his skull in Tham Lod, we carried him out of the cave in less than an hour. He had suffered no other broken bones, and the scene of the accident was less than a kilometre from the cave entrance. The higher caverns in Tham Lod are big, so we were able to run with our stretcher, and the underground ladders helped us in the steepest places.

Recovering the next unlucky tourist turned into a far more difficult undertaking. The accident happened more than two kilometres inside a twisting stream tunnel with low ceilings. The casualty, another Australian (I still can't figure out the attraction), had joined one of our adventure caving tours. Lek, the father of Nit's abused baby, had guided him and three other guests deep into Tham Pha Mon. I had been running tours through this cave for years, and the participants spent four hours negotiating a fun mix of tight sections and superb formation-encrusted caverns.

Lek's group had climbed a bank of active flowstone away from the usual route, then submerged themselves in a short sump pool to resurface in a new extension for the cave. Inside the pristine chamber, crystal-clear cave water slid down from a higher level over gleaming white stone.

The discovery excited two Australian veterinarians on the trip, and they climbed up onto the waterfall to look for more cave. One of them fell and broke his leg near the ankle. They diagnosed the seriousness of the break and fashioned a splint with pieces of wood the stream had washed down the falls. The small group carried the injured Australian to the main stream, where Lek left them with candles. He ran with two lights and exited the cave in record time.

Lek jogged along the road and hitched a ride back to Cave Lodge. We threw rope, a hatchet and a hessian rice sack into the pickup. I drove close to the cave entrance, where we chopped bamboo poles to make a crude stretcher.

It took us more than five hours to carry, drag and manhandle the Australian out of the cave. High on shock-induced secretions, he stayed in good spirits, and we maintained his morale by pulling his leg, Aussie style. When we rolled him off the stretcher so he could wriggle through awkward body-hugging restrictions, I offered encouragement such as 'Come on, shake a leg, we haven't got all bloody day'. The next morning I drove him to Pai Hospital, where a doctor x-rayed and cast his break.

The next caving accident was far worse. The victim, a Dutch guest, had joined a popular day trip that visits three caves in a karst area north of Ban Tham Lod. Our guides lead people uphill from the lodge for an hour to a small Lahu village and then descend into a doline (a closed depression) to Tham Fossil, a 600-metre-long system Australian cavers and I had explored in 1990. We had named the cave after layers of seashell fossils we found imbedded in 200-million-year-old slabs of limestone near the end of the cave.

From Tham Fossil, our tour groups cross into another doline with a small stream that sinks into Tham Nam Tok, also known as Waterfall Cave. The water flows underground for 400 metres before it plummets 30 vertical metres to a lower level. To reach the top of the falls, visitors must negotiate low sections on their knees and elbows and slide on their bellies in cold water. I had abseiled the waterfall drop a couple of times in the hot dry season and confirmed there is one known way in and out of this cave.

The last stop on the tour is a small cavern that contains the remains of Pi Maen coffins. An Australian laboratory in Lucas Heights has dated a sliver of wood from the outside of one of

the hollowed teak logs in this cave and assigned a radiocarbon date of 1,650 years BP (Before Present), plus or minus 50 years. Fragments of bone, human teeth and simple cord-marked pottery remain on the cave floor near the coffins. From the Pi Maen cave, the walk back to the lodge takes two hours on a scenic forest path that winds between limestone crags.

On 28 November 2001 we were running two trips to these three caves with a group of Australians and a group of Dutch guests. Wat, Diew's brother, was with the Australians. Duen, Diew's cousin, and Jing, Nung's cousin, were leading the Dutch group, and they reached Tham Nam Tok first.

The Dutch group crawled and waded inside the cave tunnel to the top of the waterfall where they could see the stream drop into a deep hole. Pascal, a big man in his 20s, was near the lip when he lost his footing and fell backwards into the abyss. His friends gasped in horror as they watched him plunge silently into the black void. They shouted his name, and some of them thought they could hear him answer. The only sound the others heard was the echo of water beating on rock. The group shone their torches, but they couldn't see Pascal or the bottom of the waterfall. In a state of shock and disbelief, they exited the cave.

Duen ran back to the lodge with one of the guests. The others waited near the stream sink with Wat and the Australian group. I was working at the lodge with Steve Brown, a friend from Australia, when Duen sprinted through the front gate. When he told me what had happened, my jaw dropped. The subterranean waterfall was the highest in the district, and I could visualise the sheer drop and the rocks at its base.

I stuffed a couple of sets of vertical gear, a 90-metre length of 11-millimetre static rope, tapes, lights, water and blankets into packs. Steve said he'd join me, but I knew he disliked heights and the risks associated with hanging on ropes. As we were leaving, a Canadian couple arrived, looking for a room. One of them said she was a rock climber and a paramedic, and offered to join us.

We drove to the small Lahu village nearest to the cave and then jogged, with heavy packs, 40 minutes to the sinking stream. The water was flowing high for November, and it numbed my feet. Winter had arrived early, and a cold front from China had enveloped Pang Mapha.

Wat joined me inside the cave with Steve, Duen, one of the Dutch guests and the Canadian couple. We dragged our heavy gear through sections where the roof dropped to less than half a metre above the cave floor and the stream soaked us up to our necks.

We reached the drop and shone our lights down into the hole. There was nothing to see but dark rocks, empty cave, and spray. I shivered from the cold and the prospect of descending.

We fastened the caving rope to a boulder and used a pack as a rope protector on the lip of the waterfall. Further down, the rope would rub against other protrusions, but I had brought no other protectors and trusted the rope would withstand the abrasion. The danger would increase when we ascended the waterfall with a jerking rhythm.

The Canadian and I geared up and checked each other's harnesses for safety. She had used only figure eight devices for abseiling, and I quickly showed her how to use one of my racks, a simple device cavers use for a slow descent on long pitches. The rope loops in and out of a row of steel bars in a rack, and the thick metal frame helps absorb the heat created by the friction.

I knew coherent communication or visual contact with the people on top would be impossible from the base of the falls, where the thunder of the falling water distorts the meaning of the loudest shout. We agreed that I would descend first, unclip at the bottom and shout once. The Canadian would follow after she heard me.

She knew more first aid than I did, and I was glad she had come. If anything went wrong, though, Steve was the sole person I knew in northern Thailand who had any vertical caving experience. Another problem was that the Canadian and I were wearing the two harnesses I owned. Still, I was confident that Steve and Wat could save us if necessary; a lot of bamboo grows in the forest near the cave entrance.

I stepped over the lip and tried to bounce away from the waterfall. Halfway down the drop I swung into the full force of the icy water. It pounded on my helmet and gushed inside my shirt. I kicked away from the water and looked down. My headlamp beam lit up the base of the waterfall, and I spotted the motionless body of Pascal on a small elevated platform. He lay on his back, arms splayed, and his face glowed a ghostly white against the black rocks. I dropped to the ledge, detached myself from the rope and shouted to the top.



I was trembling and my heart was thumping when I touched Pascal's wrist. His arm felt colder than my fingers, and I couldn't feel a pulse. His lifeless open eyes stared up the face of the falls. I had tried to prepare myself for this, but I was a caver and had never dealt with an underground fatality. I had hoped against all odds that somehow Pascal could have survived. He was wearing a professional caving helmet, but he had fallen more than 20 metres onto rock.

I stood up and shone my light towards the approaching Canadian. I realised that I didn't know her name. A steady downdraft buffeted spray onto my face and my jaw ached. My drenched clothing clung to my quivering body and cold shivers shot spasms up my spine.

The Canadian unclipped and I relaxed a little, glad to have company. I didn't want to pronounce Pascal dead without another opinion, even in the face of the obvious. She checked for signs of life and agreed he had died on impact.

My original intention was to initiate a recovery effort that day, but it was already late in the afternoon, we still had a tough exit ahead of us, and Pascal was dead. He was a big man and there were not enough of us to hoist him up to the stream passage. The waterfall was generating a strong wind on the lower ledge and hypothermia would set in if we stayed much longer.

I felt reluctant to leave Pascal alone in such an inhospitable place, but I knew nothing would disturb him this deep under the earth. I let the Canadian go up first. When she called out, I clipped my ascenders on the rope and started up the falls, swinging sideways to avoid the full force of the water. Using a sit down-stand up technique, I bounced up the rope and hoped it was rubbing on smooth rocks.

Back at Ban Tham Lod, I contacted our headman and the Pang Mapha District Officer, and they informed the police. A group of officers arrived after sunset with a doctor. They wanted to inspect the scene of the accident that night and let the doctor establish the cause of death. I explained how difficult it was to reach the place at any time. I implored the District Officer to arrange for a specialist rescue team from the army or border patrol police to help me recover the body.

I broke the terrible news to the distraught group of Dutch guests. The tour leader telephoned the Netherlands to inform his company so they could tell Pascal's family, and I talked with the genial but very concerned owner of the small tour company that had organised the group's Thailand trip. I handed out beers, and we sat close to the fire in the main house. I thought of all the other times over the past 18 years I had stared despondently into the flames in the centre of the lodge, trying to come to terms with a traumatic or disturbing event. If I wasn't sharing the grief of the tragedy with Pascal's friends, I'm sure I would have cried openly.

The accident shook my Shan wife to her animistic core. Like the Lahu in the Chiang Mai Hospital morgue, Nung was afraid of Pi Hoong, the bad-death spirit. She told me to remove my clothes outside the house, then bathe with water containing the burnt seedpods of a wild vine that people call som boi in Northern Thai, or mahk harn in Shan. This ancient remedy dispels the evil spirits associated with an unnatural or violent death. Nung kept her distance, and I slept alone for the next two nights.

Our Shan staff held similar fears after the Italian woman had overdosed in Bungalow 11, and they refused to clean the room. We asked a Thai Buddhist monk to exorcise any lingering spirits, and he sprinkled holy water mixed with som boi leaves in the room. The girls remained wary, so we solved the problem by pulling down the bungalow and rebuilding it in another spot.

Next morning, a Thai border patrol police rescue team arrived from Mae Hong Son. Wat and I led them and a group of villagers the headman had gathered to the cave waterfall. The team brought ropes and figure eights but had no ascending gear. I asked them how they planned to get out of the pit. They said their friends on top would pull them up. This sounded very dangerous, as the people hauling the rope wouldn't be able to see the person clipped onto the other end. If the climber lost his footing on the slippery face, his friends could drag him face first over rock.

I geared up first and then checked the anchor, my three torches and my vertical gear. I wore a wetsuit vest this time, but after crawling on my belly in the cave stream, I still felt cold. A

miserable late night and a fitful sleep alone hadn't helped numb my nerves. I dropped to the ledge where I had left Pascal. The Canadian had gently closed his eyes, and the scene felt less overwhelming than on the previous day.

Two muscular police officers descended and joined me on the ledge. I had told them to bring walkie-talkies sealed in plastic bags so we could communicate with the higher group. The police on top threw down a canvas tarp attached to a rope, but it snagged high up on the uneven face. I was wearing ascenders, so they sent me back up the falls to free the tarp. Hanging in the waterfall, I struggled to change over to my rack for the descent.

My companions seemed reluctant to touch the body, and they told me to lift each end while they spread the tarp underneath. We wrapped and bound the corpse as well as we could. The water hammered down, so loud the police had to shout into their radios. We clipped the bundle onto a rope, and the men on top of the falls began hauling. The ropes around the tarp soon caught on jagged overhangs. The upper team lowered and hoisted it several times before we decided to try another approach.

I abseiled to the base of the cavern, tied a rope to a thick stalactite, and stretched it until it was out of the spray. The police on the ledge clipped the tarp onto the new line with carabineers. The rope sagged with the weight and caught on the face again. I didn't have the strength needed to tighten the line and pull it and the tarp away from the rocks.

The police called me back to the ledge. Before I climbed, I wanted to make sure they had tied off my rope on a secure anchor, but we couldn't understand each other against the noise of crashing water. They gave me a thumbs up and I ascended the rope. When I reached the ledge, I recoiled in horror. They had wrapped my rope around a 15-centimetre-tall smooth stalagmite. The line could have slipped off the top, or the formation could have snapped with my weight. My confidence in the rescue team turned to mistrust.

They sent me up into the falls again to free more caught ropes. The men above us were trying to wedge a log across the cavern, above the waterfall lip, to lift the ropes away from the rocks. I feared the tree would slip off the water-worn walls and smash down on us. Nothing was working, and we had already spent more than five hours in the frigid hole.

I stood alone in the spray on a higher ledge, clipped on rope, with Pascal wrapped near my anaesthetised feet. I had been trying to reposition the ropes, but the cold was defeating me. My fingers and toes had lost all sensation, and I couldn't turn the barrels on the carabineers to unclip them. I needed to get out while I still could. The others also looked ready to give up. I could see them shouting into their radios, and I guessed they were instructing their mates to heave them out.

Three ropes dangled beside me. I had no idea if any of them was safe to climb. I yelled to the men below me to radio and find out which rope the team on top had secured, but they couldn't hear what I said. My teeth were chattering, and I was beyond caring. I clipped onto the closest rope, climbed up to the lip and headed upstream towards the late afternoon sun.

The rescue team returned to the lodge, and we mulled over our options. We decided to strengthen the scaffolding on the top of the falls and use more people to pull the ropes. We also needed someone to ascend with the tarp and free it when it snagged on rocks.

On the next day of the recovery effort, Wat carried in a block and tackle set. I wore my wetsuit vest and a raincoat. I told the police I would rope down to Pascal alone, re-clip the carabineers on the tarp before the cold numbed my fingers, tighten the loose lines, and then ascend. If the bundle caught near the top of the falls, the police could lower one of their team and free it.

Away from everyone, in the cold cascades with Pascal for the third time in three days, I shivered and wished I were elsewhere. I talked aloud to him as I retied the ropes and promised I would get him out of the cave that day. I re-attached the carabineers and double-checked everything to ensure I had done it properly.

I ascended fast and helped the more than 20 people pulling on the two ropes I had fastened onto both ends of the tarp. When it caught on an overhang six metres down, we lowered one of the police on another line. He cut one of my snagged caving ropes and freed the bundle. We unwrapped the tarp on the top of the falls, transferred Pascal onto a stretcher, and carried him the last 400 metres to the cave entrance. Outside, more volunteers took over for the last stretch to the road.



After the death of Pascal I lost interest in vertical caving. I never wanted to see another corpse in a cave. Six years would pass before I would strap on my caving harness again, abseil into an unexplored pit and look for two people who were missing, presumed murdered (see ‘Gang fuk and som boi’). In the meantime, I found there were other ways to die in a cave, apart from plunging off a ledge or choking in bad air.

# STUCK IN THE DARK

Mark, a frequent visitor from Britain, almost spent the rest of his life in Tham Christmas, a cave that cavers staying at Cave Lodge had located and named on a Christmas Day. They thought the stream that sank into Tham Christmas connected with Tham Huet, the foul-air hellhole, but I had no desire to confirm this.

Mark liked to visit places that other lodge guests would not venture to alone. One day he didn't tell anyone where he was going and left the lodge. We thought he had gone to Wilderness, our other guesthouse on the way to Mae Hong Son. Alone, he descended deep into the stream tunnel of Tham Christmas, crossed boulders and then slid into a rock-sniffing restriction where the water lapped his lips when he lay on his back. That was where his lights died.

Mark was stuck in the cave for 34 hours before he somehow managed to feel his way out. If he had failed in his self-rescue, his disappearance would still be a mystery.

Something always seemed to go wrong when Mark was involved. I was driving back from Chiang Mai with Nung and Pen one evening when, on a tight mountain corner near Pai, we saw what looked like a motorbike accident. Men in military fatigues were on the scene, and we stopped to offer assistance. I was astonished to see Mark lying in the back of a pickup. His trail bike had skidded on the corner and dropped him in front of a truck headed the other way. He was lucky again. The truck's wheels had crushed both of his legs below the knees, rather than his head. The driver had fled.

The odd coincidence of arriving on the scene of Mark's accident grew stranger. The leader of the border patrol police rescue team, who I had spent two days with in Tham Nam Tok, was

driving the first car to pass by after the accident. When I turned up, he had already splinted Mark's legs.

Mark lay on his back for months in a Chiang Mai hospital where the surgeons rejoined the shattered bones with steel plates and screws. They probably left a few of the screws loose. Before the ill-fated Englishman could walk a straight line, he rode a Honda Dream scooter from Chiang Mai to Cave Lodge.

I think I know what drives people like Mark to take unnecessary risks. Whenever I can escape the workload at the lodge, I head for the hills and satisfy my craving for adventure. On one memorable trip, Eric, a friend from Terania Creek, joined me on a walk to Doi On, a 1,750-metre mountain that divides Pang Mapha from Pai District, to look for a way into the underground course of an emerging stream. When I was trekking in the area in 1979 I had seen it flow out of a hole near the peak. We walked six hours from the lodge and reached Doi On in the early afternoon.

I located the watercourse, and we waded against the flow to where it seeped out of the mountain. Vines and thorny succulents entangled the boulder pile above the outflow, but we soon found a gap. The constricted aperture reminded me of the bear entrance to Tham Mae Lana, but I doubted that anything with warm blood had ever dropped in – apart from porcupines and bats. We squeezed in and jumped down to the floor of a cave. Hundreds of stalactites hung from the ceiling, and banks of glittering flowstone lined the walls of a spacious and inviting stream passage. I had not planned for deep exploration, but our batteries would last a few hours.

Eric and I headed upstream, walking fast, trying to see as much of the cave as possible. The pristine formations on the ceiling and walls of the tunnel were outstanding, and Eric started running out of superlatives to describe them. I had seen a lot of beautiful formations during my years of caving, and I knew we had discovered a very pretty stream cave. If the going remained easy, it would be hard to stop.

Hours from the entrance, we stopped for a break on a gravel bank. It had been a long day and the cold water in the stream was sapping our strength. We nibbled on our rations of

banana muffins. I must have eaten more than 5,000 of them since I had built the first Cave Lodge oven, but they still tasted great.

‘Mate, have you got a watch?’ I asked Eric.

‘Nuh. How long do you reckon we’ve been in here?’

‘Hard to say. More than a couple of hours.’

‘How long will our batteries last?’ He sounded a little nervous; Eric hadn’t explored a wild cave before.

‘How long’s a cave?’ I grinned at him.

‘What are you talking about? How would I know?’

‘No it’s not. It’s a bay in Vietnam.’

Eric had more serious things to think about than my flippant humour. ‘Do you think we’ll find a way through?’

‘I bloody well hope so.’

‘What if it ends? Shouldn’t we turn back now, before our batteries run out?’

Any sensible person would have agreed. A lightless situation would not be anything like what Mark faced in Tham Christmas. There was no touchy-feely way out of this place. If our batteries died we would never be able to claw our way out, and no one knew where we were.

But we carried on. Neither of us wanted to turn our back on easy cave passage that humans had never seen. We concentrated on the stream tunnel and ignored leads to higher chambers and tributaries. Small waterfalls, rooms half-filled with rubble, and high mounds of shimmering flowstone slowed us down. In large caverns I left a few cairns of stacked stones and looked over my shoulder to familiarise myself with our escape route.

While scouting for a way over one long section of rockfall, I saw passage beyond the reach of my torch. At first I thought it was an optical illusion but the air contained plenty of oxygen. I switched off my torch to make sure it was real. The rocks in front of me formed silhouettes against distant grey shapes. I shouted to Eric that I could see daylight. He hooted with elation and relief.

We rushed towards the light, drawn like nocturnal insects to a candle. I have watched them,



hundreds of times, fly into naked flames, and I can't understand why they do it; the light that attracts them ends up cremating most of them.

The mood swing that accompanied our lurch for the light faded when we saw the source. We stood in a gloomy chamber with sheer walls and a large sky hole in the ceiling, 30 metres above us. I collected dry branches that had fallen into the pit from overhanging trees and lit a fire to dry our clothes.

It was almost dark outside, which meant we had spent more than four hours in the cave. Maybe we had seen a fraction of it, and we could carry on for days and still not find another way out. To keep going meant gambling with the unknown, as well as the finite limitations of our torches and our lives.

I always carry a lighter in my caving pack to check air quality, and a couple of backup candles for emergencies. We chose to continue upstream, for a candle's worth of cave. I guessed our batteries would last the distance we had already covered. I could burn Eric's clothes and shoes if we were desperate.

We used one torch at a time to conserve our light supply. The cave passage began to narrow and appeared to be squeezing to an end. We slithered on our bellies under a low ceiling and reached a point where the stream flowed out from beneath slabs of rock, with mere centimetres of space above the water.

Thousands of daddy longlegs, spider-like insects, coated the ceiling above the stream in an audible, quivering mat. I had seen these insects congregate in moist areas near the entrance of other caves, and I felt certain we were within metres of the stream sink.

We moved to the side and scrambled higher into a larger breakdown room where shattered blocks from the fractured ceiling formed the floor. We climbed over the rubble and saw a thin shaft of twilight. I lifted Eric up to the hole in the cave roof, and he squeezed his arm outside and waved at the wilderness encircling the stream sink. We both swore.

When I was 15, Australian police arrested two friends and me for shoplifting cigarettes from a supermarket in a small country town. They imprisoned us in a colonial-style cell with sandstone walls and a small high window that let in light, but not a view. We had lied

about our identities, and the cops kept us in the cell for one night – long enough to taste incarceration and know that I didn't like it.

Now I had to escape my confinement. If we failed to find a way out, we would have to risk the return trip through the cave with our dying lights. I looked at Eric and then at the opening in the ceiling. He shrugged, and I nodded. We smashed rocks into the blocks wedged near the hole and tore at them with our hands. Gambling the roof wouldn't collapse on us, we worked until our last candle died. I hoisted Eric up to the hole we had enlarged and he wriggled through. He reached down and hauled me out of the cave.

Fireflies speckled the black shroud of forest canopy over our heads, and in the gaps stars shone like cave glowworms. I felt good. I closed my eyes and heard Jimi Hendrix hazing my head: 'Scuse me, while I kiss the sky.'

We had broken our way out into an unfamiliar dark jungle. I lit a fire to dry our saturated clothes and ward off the winter chill. There was no hurry to search for a way back to the lodge. The threat of eternal entombment had passed, and outside the cave there was nothing to worry about anymore. I didn't bring a compass but a sliver of moon would define the silhouette of Doi On and help me find the right direction home.

Our return trip turned into an enjoyable jaunt, except for one more scare. Along the way, on a high ridge path, two large animals crashed out of the bush in front of us and emitted a wild growling sound. In the dim moonlit shadows, Eric thought they were tigers. I shone my depleted torch into the glowing eyes of a pair of agitated civets, common mammals in our area. The sight of these weird-looking animals – they have bodies like dogs, cat-like heads and possum's tails – made us leap backwards. They bared their teeth, I clapped my hands, and they slunk up a tree.

We joked about the unlikely but disastrous scenario of tigers mauling us after we had survived our gamble in the cave. I told Eric that nobody has seen a tiger in our area for 20 years. People with rifles graze their cattle in the forest habitat of deer, the main prey of the big cats. The cows devour the food supply of the deer, and the locals shoot and eat the mammals the tigers hunt. But if any tigers had evaded the massacre of their food source, then Doi On

would be a likely place to encounter them. The mountain still shelters a herd of wild elephants that cross the border from Burma to graze in its intact forests.

The cave Eric and I had discovered contains one of the highest underground stream passages in Thailand, and it is one of the more magnificent caves in Pang Mapha. I named it Tham Doi On. A year after our discovery I guided Nung, and our friends Dave, Bill and Paco to the mountain. We planned to camp on Doi On for three days, chart the cave and search for more openings.

In the afternoon of our first day in the wilderness, we led and talked Paco through a dry cave I had never explored. We found the entrance in a cliff above a Lahu poppy field that bloomed with purple flowers. Paco handled the tight squeezes and short drops well. He touched the walls and followed continual repetitive instructions such as ‘Sit down where your feet are...head down...a bit lower...put your right hand on the wall’.

Paco’s tunnel vision fizzled out in the dark, but in a lightless situation he had one advantage over the rest of the team – he didn’t need a torch, which saved on batteries. I wasn’t sure whether a sightless caver would be better equipped than the rest of us if our lights failed. We turned off our torches for the experiment, and I placed Paco ahead of the rest of the group. We established that it makes no difference whether the blind or the blinded lead in a dark cavern.

Next morning I entered Tham Doi On for the second time with Nung, Dave and Bill. We wore helmets and kneepads and carried plenty of lights and batteries. Paco waited at our camp near the entrance, and we told him we would return for dinner.

Bill is a huge man, and I thought he might not fit through the hole Eric and I had punctured at the end of the cave. But we carried enough lights for days of caving and could always backtrack.

The trip started as a pleasant outing with time to check and measure all the leads Eric and I had overlooked. We ended up taking twice as long to traverse the cave, and after 12 hours of scrambling over rocks, scaling cold waterfalls and squirming in wet constrictions, had little energy and enthusiasm for a return trip through the cave. We could reach our camp much

faster if we walked outside.

Nung and I squeezed out of the hole and then Dave helped Bill up. He wriggled his head and arms out, but his hips wedged in the gap. We tried to push him back down but his ribcage caught on jagged rocks.

Between good friends, there were no constraints, and the jokes flowed fast. 'We'll be back to drag you out next week, when you've lost a few kilos.' I offered to leave my water bottle with him.

Dave, trapped in the cave Bill had sealed, was quick to respond. 'No way am I waiting, guys. I've got a Swiss army knife and can start trimming his belly now, from the bottom up.'

There was talk of greasing him like a slippery pig, and we discussed more severe fat-reduction methods, such as building a close fire to make him sweat. Bill wasn't amused, and the teasing wore off. Dave hung onto his feet and tugged him back down into the cave. Using a rock, I began to chip out a bigger opening. I bashed at the hole for 20 minutes and Dave pushed Bill back up. I pulled, Bill sucked in hard and squirmed, and Nung shouted encouragement reminiscent of the uer, uer, uuerh that Thai nurses chant in maternity wards.

The cave kept a few scrapings of his skin – much less than Dave would have taken if he had surgically intervened and performed a caesarian with his penknife. This was definitely Bill's closest experience with rebirth.

The trip from the squeeze hole to our camp bamboozled me. We bush-bashed for hours in tangled jungle and didn't break out of the bamboo forest encircling the stream sink until after midnight. Paco was very happy to see our lights. He had started to blow his whistle at sunset to help us find our way back to camp, but had given up after an hour. If we hadn't returned from the cave, the chances of him stumbling out of the wilderness and finding help were slim. We were famished and devoured a late dinner, while we related the story of Bill's intimate encounter with Mother Nature to Paco.



# BITTEN

**D**angerous situations have littered the path I have chosen to follow in life. I have endeavoured to reduce the risks, but in Asia nobody is safe all the time. An awareness of some of the avoidable hazards has helped keep me alive.

When I left Australia, my father, a microbiologist, gave me a thick book on tropical medicine that detailed appalling bacterial, parasitic and viral diseases, several of which I ended up catching. The last page contained a sobering reminder: 'The motor vehicle poses the greatest threat to your health on your travels'. When I was driving my disintegrating Land Rover in the hills, I could relate to this profound statement. I quote it to my guests if they question me on the prevalence of dangerous diseases in our district, knowing that most of them have ridden on an aging bus from Chiang Mai or doubled-up on a Honda Dream from Pai to reach Cave Lodge.

Tourists who rent motorbikes are often novices, and many ride without a licence or helmet. Thousands acquire a motor scooter exhaust tattoo on their calf, and the less fortunate experience the bargain hospitality of Thai hospitals or morgues. The growing number of farang casualties has prompted the authorities to paint arrows that point forward on the left side of roads and erect signs on highways that tourists frequent: 'Please remember you drive on the left'.

Malaria is another major killer in the Golden Triangle. Many visitors to Thailand take pills that suppress the symptoms of malaria, but widespread use of prophylactic drugs can increase the chances of the parasites developing resistance, which is a serious concern for Thai health officials. They advise visitors to avoid mosquito bites, rather than ingest preventive medicines, and diagnose any suspected symptoms at the nearest clinic. I reassure lodge guests that the

number of cases in Pang Mapha decreases every year, and I have never caught it.

Besides mosquitoes, another worry of some visitors is the creepy crawlies that might be lurking in their bungalow, the forest, the river and caves. Large huntsman spiders cling to the walls of buildings and caves in Thailand, but they are apparently harmless. I try to extol their beneficial role in reducing malaria, but this approach rarely dispels a nervous guest's paranoia.

I have inflated guests' irrational arachnophobia in a light-hearted attempt to slacken their web of fear. This method relies on tales of spiders that can leap two metres and land on your face, squirt venom into your eye or deposit eggs in your ear. It doesn't work either.

English guests seem the most apprehensive. I assume no life-threatening critters exist in their landscape of deforested farms and concrete-sealed soil. For Australians, playing with the gullible phobias of the English can be an amusing pastime. I advise the Brits not to worry – the mosquito net in their bungalow can keep out spiders and snakes too. I remind them to brush their teeth, wash their mouth and tuck in the net before retiring. Bush cockroaches are notorious for licking the gunk out of the corner of an eye, tugging on meat stuck between teeth or chewing on the crud encrusted in the crevasses of lips. 'And you wouldn't want to know where they can lay their eggs.'

The worst way to begin a day at the lodge is to wake up in the dark to the anxious shouts of a member of my staff. On one occasion, Toon, our Burmese–Shan early warning system, heard a guest's cries for help and roused me with, 'John, come quickly, something has happened to a farang'.

Thick mist was filtering the faint glimmer of pre-dawn light when I ran out of my room towards the main house and anguished cries of distress. My head was spinning with a random assortment of possible scenarios, all bad.

A young English guest lay curled on his side on the plank floor. He writhed and moaned as he grasped one wrist with his other hand. Tall trees in front of the lodge shrouded the room in darkness. I lifted up his hand, shone a torch, and saw two distinct puncture marks on his palm.

'Was it a snake?' He shook his head.

‘Was it about eight inches long with lots of legs?’ He gritted his teeth and nodded. The sting had shocked him speechless. His ashen features stood out in the gloom, and he had the pleading look in his eyes of a dying man who desperately wanted to live.

‘You’re not going to die. I will take you to the clinic.’ I dropped his throbbing hand and he reverted to his foetal position on the floor.

I turned and dashed towards the Land Rover. I had parked it the previous day, facing downhill, on the road out of the lodge. The worn bolts that held the starter motor against the engine block had dropped out. Strands of wire held the motor in place, but it didn’t work. I would have to clutch start the decrepit junk heap on the slope. The leaking battery held little power to heat the glow plugs in the diesel engine and, on a cold winter morning, this could be a problem. On less anxious occasions I would lift the bonnet and sun bake the engine or place a clay pot with glowing coals under the sump.

I was opening the rover door when Toon shouted, ‘Mun dtai lao!’ I froze, and tasted a familiar bitter flavour rising in my throat. I sucked in a deep breath to calm myself. No way is he dead. A centipede bite would not kill him, unless an acute allergic reaction had stopped his heart or blocked his windpipe. Maybe he had congenital problems with his heart or liver or something. He did look skinny and anaemic.

I raced back into the house. The young guest was unconscious, but breathing. I lifted him by the shoulders, shook him and slapped his face. I had seen this technique used in movies. His eyes rolled in their sockets, and then he looked at me.

‘You are not going to die’, I told him again. ‘I will bring the car.’

The uncertainty of my patient, and the ambulance, had me on the edge of panic. The nagging question was, ‘What the fuck will I do if the rover doesn’t start?’ I could tie a tourniquet, but how would I deal with heart failure? If it was a movie set I could stab a hypodermic full of adrenalin into his chest, but this was real life, not pulp fiction.

I glowed the plugs for a minute and took my foot off the brake. The hill was short, and I had one chance. If I blew it, the rover could slam into the side of the main house and transform the poisoned Englishman into road kill. I let out the clutch and the engine spluttered in

second gear. I rammed the clutch back in and revved the cold engine while braking hard. I pulled up, one metre from the wall.

I drove him to the clinic in Soppong and woke up a nurse. She applied ammonia and gave him antihistamines and painkillers.

The unlucky guest had put his hand outside his net to grab a blanket and touched an orange centipede. The adults are 20 centimetres long and, when threatened, curl over and sink their fangs in deep. The affected limb throbs with severe pain for five hours or more.

I know because one struck me on my foot when I was closing an outside gate one night. Instantaneous, excruciating pain shot up my leg. It was dark and I couldn't see what had hurt me. I ran inside the lodge for a torch, but whatever it was had gone.

I squeezed blood out of two holes in the top of my foot. A snake couldn't have opened its jaws that wide, so I guessed I had trodden on a centipede.

Neil, a friend from Terania Creek, drove me to Pai in case it was a snakebite. The hospital stored no anti-venene and the doctor couldn't diagnose the source of the poison, so I took analgesics to ease the pain.

Scorpions, like centipedes, are not aggressive, but will strike if people touch them. An Israeli guest ran into the lodge one day and said one had stung him on his lip. He asked me if Thai scorpions were deadly. I laughed and told him I had survived numerous stings. The pain was mild and dissipated after a few minutes. I gave him Tiger Balm to smear around the bite, but he looked unconvinced and scared. He said that in his country scorpions are taken seriously. Maybe his lips were a bit too close to his brain for him to feel relaxed about a scorpion injecting neurotoxins.

When comparing the pain that nasty creatures can inflict, I place winged attackers high on the threshold list. In the wet season, large hornets hang their nests from the eaves of our house. They attack when provoked, but their formidable reputation discourages people from approaching them. Hornet larvae, however, is a delicacy and some people risk severe pain to drive hornets from their nests with smoke so they collect the young.

I have watched meat-eating hornets drone near the market butcher in Soppong, drop onto



slabs of lean pork and tear off chunks almost as big as they are. They soar like eagles, clasp their dangling meal with their tiny claws. Locals say they can strip the flesh off a corpse in the forest. Calcium-craving porcupines then devour the bones. I am not sure how my neighbours know stuff like this.

Several kinds of hornets terrorise the hills, including a frightening species that constructs nests below the ground. Their poison can kill children or people with allergies, and a single sting causes severe pain. A swarm attacked our Australian friend Steve Brown – and he can attest that half a dozen stings are somewhat worse.

Airborne strikes on our guests by hornets or smaller wasps and bees are rare. The worst case was an attack by a ferocious swarm of hornets on an American couple, an Englishman and an Italian. They were following a route on my infamous hand-drawn map (stream crossings inaccurate, not to scale, distances distorted, impossible to get lost, and so on) to Ban Huai Haeng (Dry Stream Village), a Red Lahu village north of the lodge. It turned into a journey none of them would ever forget.

The group had missed the turn-off to a scenic ridge path I had directed them to and headed up Dry Stream valley. They had walked a couple of hours when a thunderstorm pelted the hills with rain. The stream turned brown, broke its banks and flooded the path. The group moved up into the forest to escape the deluge. There, in the pathless tangle of thick growth, they disturbed an underground nest.

A cloud of hornets chomped holes in their clothing and punctured their flesh with multiple stings. The terrified group fled in panic, towards the nest. They bashed their legs and feet against trees and rocks, and two of them lost their shoes. The hornets chased them for hundreds of metres. The group knew that flying insects were attacking them but didn't know how dangerous they were. The piercing pain from more than 10 stings each was unrelenting, and the Americans thought they would die. They jumped into the raging river, and the current swept one woman face first down steep rapids. It flung the Italian onto flood debris and ripped the sandals off his feet.

They all made it back to the lodge at sunset with agonising puffed welts on their upper

bodies, cuts and bruises on their legs, and serious psychological trauma happening inside their heads. I reassured them that if they were allergic their bloated bodies would still be up the creek. I handed out analgesics and iodine and told them to relax.

The Englishman and the Italian felt better after a meal and a couple of bottles of Chang beer. I told them they had had a remarkable experience that would become a highlight of their travels. They had suffered only temporary pain, not permanent damage from a motorbike accident or a debilitating disease.

I then confided to the Englishman that when hornets bite, they deposit their eggs. The growing grubs feed on the rotting flesh surrounding the swollen bite and can take weeks to mature. When their wings form, they break out of pustules that form near the wound and fly off to start a new colony. The best way to suck out undeveloped eggs is with leeches.

We were chuckling at this blatant lie when a distraught American came up from Bungalow 15. He said the stings on his girlfriend were still painful, and they couldn't sleep. He then handed me a sealed plastic bag with a squashed huntsman spider. 'Is this poisonous?' he demanded. 'It was in my bathroom. I had to bash it with my sandal, three times, before I killed it.' The flattened spider's guts had stuck its body to the plastic. I flicked the bag in his lap and yelled, 'Shit! It's still alive!'

The guy screamed, jumped back, wobbled and almost collapsed on the floor. His reaction was so extreme I offered my sincere apologies for my inappropriate response. I told him to tuck in his mosquito net to prevent any more close encounters. I shared a Chang with the other survivors, who thought the American's reaction entertaining.

When leaving the next morning, the couple suggested I put up a sign notifying visitors of the dangers in the forest. I agreed that the natural world is a dangerous place.

Cold-blooded killers constitute another menace in the hills. Once, on the path to Nam Lang, a big cobra came within striking distance. The snake was waiting for small animals fleeing dry season fires, and its dry-leaf-coloured camouflage had merged with the withered deciduous forest. I stepped within a metre of the cobra, and its broad diamond-patterned head flared at waist height. It reared back, ready to strike. I leapt backwards, and it slithered away. I

was with caver friends, and we avoided the path by taking a long detour up the river.

We exited the cave after midnight and still felt apprehensive. We waded downstream to where I thought it was safe to leave the water. One idiot was humming the tune from *Jaws*. I led the group back onto the path, took two steps and almost tripped on a python, five metres long and thicker than my lower leg. It blocked the trail, and no one dared step across it. We jumped back into the river.

Snake sightings are rare at the lodge, but we have faced tense stand-offs with kraits and cobras. One time, a large cobra coiled on the ground beneath the dining area of the main house and devoured puppies. Our pups had been disappearing, one by one, for days. One of our staff heard the squealing, grabbed Doi's pistol, went under the house and began squeezing the trigger. The snake dropped the puppy, puffed its neck and held its ground. The bullets missed their target, and the shooter's shrill shouting in Thai intensified. Our guests didn't know the reason for the gunshots and turmoil beneath the bamboo panels they were sitting on. Our friend Dave was at the lodge that night, while I was shopping in Chiang Mai. He recalled that the commotion sounded like a deranged Thai on a rampage with a gun. The bullets had more chance of killing a guest than the cobra, so Dave went down and bashed the unfortunate snake with a hoe.

I dislike killing our wildlife but deadly cobras under the dining area or kraits in the house slither too close for comfort. Banded kraits have distinctive alternating bands of black and bright yellow along their bodies. They seem docile compared to cobras, but their venom is extremely potent. When one lazed on our front veranda, I opted to kill it rather than scare it away. A hard bash anywhere along a snake's body will immobilise it. But I took no chances with the krait and strapped a machete onto a long piece of bamboo.

Snakes have bitten two lodge guests. One struck a tourist inside Tham Lod. He described a snake with elongated yellow stripes along its body. I advised him to wash the wound and relax – the snake was a non-venomous, cave-adapted racer. I have come across racers up to two kilometres from a cave entrance. Tham Lod is an excellent food source for the racers, and they can devour enough birds and bats to grow longer than three metres. I have watched them flex

their bodies against stalactites, cross ceilings and catch bats in the dark.

A snake bit another guest, an Israeli, on his foot when he stepped on it near his bungalow. Our staff took him to the cave monastery to see a monk who stocked anti-venene. The snake was non-venomous, but the bite wound became infected and gangrene began to decompose the Israeli's foot. The doctors in Bangkok decided to lop it off at the ankle, but he wouldn't let them. He wanted to go trekking in Nepal. In Kathmandu, the doctors said they would saw his leg off at the knee. The seriousness of his condition sank in, but he didn't want to lose half a limb in a Nepali hospital. He flew to Tel Aviv, where Israeli surgeons amputated his entire leg.

When a snake sank its fangs into my foot, I was wearing sandals and jogging alone under a full moon in southern Mae Hong Son Province, on a trail three hours walk from a road. I knew snake venom could shut down vital organs, but I didn't know it could rot my leg. The bite felt like a pinprick. I stopped in time to see a small green snake slip off the path. I checked my foot and saw two holes that tingled rather than hurt.

I had to walk at least an hour to reach a Pwo Karen village where Diew and our group of trekkers were waiting for me. Earlier in the day we had left the highway and climbed a steep mountain together. When we reached the summit, Diew said she had left her purse near a stream where we had stopped for lunch. I had returned to retrieve it.

I stopped jogging, to slow the flow of any venom up my leg towards my heart, and walked to the village. One of our trekkers was a doctor, and I expected he would know what to do.

The doctor had never treated snakebite, so I consulted the village chief. The old man said two common types of green snakes inhabit the area, and one is poisonous. He asked me if it hurt or stung. When I told him it stung, he smiled and said I wouldn't die. To neutralise the poison, he breathed magic words onto my foot, and the bite caused me no further problems.

Pwo Karen men are well acquainted with puncture wounds. Thick indigo-coloured protective tattoos spread from their waists to their knees. The ink is a blend of soot from the flame of a kerosene lamp and bile from the gall bladder of an animal. Local artists use a sharp needle to apply the tattoos to teenage men, and the painful process lasts for two full days.



The mythical animals and magic designs that coat their lower body guard against snakebites, malicious spirits and other harmful attacks. The Karen say the tattoos can also block bullets and stop knives from piercing their skin. I turned down the headman's offer of a full set on my torso.

# DOG FOOD

**R**abid dogs with gnashing teeth and frothing mouths constitute another threat to travellers in Asia. Infected dogs do not always show symptoms, and doctors encourage anyone with a bite to undergo a course of rabies vaccination. Chicken plasma was once the main component of cheaper versions of the vaccine, with a patient requiring more than 10 injections into the stomach. Fortunately, rabies is rare in our district, and the locals eliminate any dogs they suspect are carriers.

Dogs and cats lounge around Cave Lodge. We appreciate their company, their expertise in rodent removal and their home security services. The cats eliminate small bush rats that build their nests in the wet season, and the dogs guard our property.

Dogs born at the lodge greet arriving guests, Thai or foreign, with a slurping, tail wagging, canine welcome. One of our mutts will try to warm a guest's lap within minutes of their arrival. The same dog, without receiving any training, snarls when locals approach the house. This innate ability develops when they are puppies, and I'm not sure how they can differentiate.

Lodge dogs have walked our guests to Soppong and then waited at a bridge for hours, watching Shan and Lahu people pass by. When a farang with a backpack appears, our dogs give them a sloppy introduction and accompany them seven kilometres back to the lodge. I have contemplated training puppies as guides to lead guests to specific villages or caves.

Ban Tham Lod residents display little tolerance for aggressive dogs. When Black Stump, a large-bodied male dog with disproportionately short legs, failed to return from a hormone-provoked sex tour in our village, we feared the worst. Stumpy had defended our house with commendable snarling and snapping gusto, which left him with enemies. Reliable sources informed us that Stumpy met his demise near the forestry station when a group of whisky-

drinking local men fancied his well-fed figure and meaty looks. How they cooked our dog I preferred not to know, but barbecued black dog meat is renowned for its man-powering properties. If the atrocity had occurred in Sydney, I imagine a Sunday paper would have run a headline such as 'Whisky-wired neighbours who couldn't keep their mouths shut'.

Most Akha like dog meat and I have no problems eating it with them, as long as they cook it well, and it is not my dog. Once though, a big group of Akha stretched my tolerance levels with a buffet of butchered puppies.

The puppies were born outside the village gate, which the villagers considered taboo. A pig giving birth inside the village area is another bad omen. To avoid any spiritual repercussions, the entire village took a day off work. At the place of birth, they cooked the mother and all her freshly born pups.

Everyone brought woven bamboo and rattan bowls to hold steamed rice. They stewed the bitch in one big wok set on three large stones above a blazing fire. The puppies, chopped into bite-sized portions, boiled in another wok nearby. A festive atmosphere prevailed as people gorged themselves on the tender meat and chewy, undercooked Akha rice. I ate a tiny morsel of the 'melt in your mouth' puppy meat to be sociable, but turned down a rubbery piece of the mother's footpad, with attached claws, that children had roasted in the coals.

Our dogs love to chase and eat free-range chickens, but once a dog indulges in its first taste of this exciting and addictive sport, it jeopardises its short life. I have lost count of our chicken-chasing dogs that have died. The chicken breeders shot some of them with their muzzle-loaders. Others returned home frothing and convulsing after chewing on a dead chicken laced with insecticide.

The Shan like dogs and generally treat them well. In return for food, the dogs guard their owners' homes and accompany them when they walk in the forest or work in their fields. Another important function of dogs in the hills is to clean up human waste. I have watched highland dogs lick baby poo off the floor of a hut and then cleanse the soiled bum with a soft warm tongue – which is more eco-friendly than disposable nappies. In villages without toilets, dogs compete with pigs in devouring the fresh excrement in the surrounding forest. A

squatting human wielding a stick can fend off the hungriest pig, but dogs are more impulsive and can lunge from behind.

Rough treatment of dogs and other animals in the hills can hit a raw nerve with sensitive guests. I have seen them on the verge of tears as they watched children kicking a puppy or plucking a live bird. Hill tribe hunters toss squirming tortoises into a fire and feel no more guilt than a vegetarian biting into a carrot or a cook boiling live prawns.

High-pitched squeals turn into soggy gurgles when a hill tribe butcher slashes a pig's neck. The gruesome sound of pigs dying is background noise in a hill tribe village, and a reality that people grow accustomed to. I enjoy fishing, but if the catch bleated like tortured sheep or squealed like dying pigs, I would find the sport far less palatable.

When hill tribe men and children clean a pig, they save everything except the contents of the gut. Scenes of hill tribe butchery were a revelation for our trekkers who were used to eating selected cuts of meat from neat packages, far from the slaughter. While Nung's brother Pat cuts up a pig's carcass, he chews on slivers of raw meat dipped in warm blood and downs shots of whisky.

I have asked trekking groups to guess what part of the buffalo many Thai people regard as the tastiest. The responses usually start with cuts of steak and move to internal organs, brains, eyes, blood, then – when they noticed my devious smile – to udders and genitalia. Nobody ever guessed the right answer, though I must admit it was a bit of a trick question. A bucket full of afterbirth is hard to conceive of as being part of a buffalo but, according to my informants, it tastes superb when cooked.

As groups groaned, I would remind them of a product from cows that westerners like to eat. For people unaccustomed to the practice, the idea of drinking milk from a lactating bovine is somewhat unappealing. Turning the milk into a yellow solid that stinks a bit like vomit – and then eating it raw – is a far more disgusting proposition.

I once stayed in a hill tribe house where the Karen owner had shot a gibbon, our nearest ape relative in Thailand. I shared a stringy morsel of the beast with my hosts at dinner. The family had chopped the rest of the ape into small pieces and suspended them on a split



bamboo frame above their fireplace. One trekking group couldn't work out which part of the butchered ape one shrivelled portion of the smoked remains came from. The hunter told us it was a dried foetus.

Red ants eggs, hornet larvae, tadpoles, grubs from logs and bamboo, flying termites, crickets, cicadas, dung beetles and countless other insects are local delicacies in the hills. Yet, while I have spent the bulk of my life living with people who eat bugs and grubs, I still prefer smelly cheese. The food people eat is a bit like religious faith. You have to begin consuming it when you are very young, because it can be hard to swallow if you try it for the first time as an adult.

# DYING TRADITIONS

**A**t a guesthouse in Umphang, in western Thailand, I was chatting with Augustine, a young Burmese trekking guide. He spoke good English with an Indian accent. We talked about his family. He said, 'I have a daughter who is six years old, and I also have a little boy, just six months old'.

Augustine then held his thumb and forefinger 15 centimetres apart and said, 'My son is this big'. Maybe I misunderstood. I asked him to repeat what he had said. He confirmed that his six-month-old baby was the size of a rat. Augustine said he talked with his boy in his dreams. He showed me a scrap of newspaper he carried in his wallet and said, 'Look, he told me the "winning" number for the lottery, and he got only one number wrong'.

Augustine invited me to see his baby boy. He led me to a small hut behind the guesthouse and introduced me to his wife. She was sitting on a stool, cradling a plastic basket on her lap. Inside the basket was a miniature bed with a tiny pillow, sheets and a folded sarong blanket. She had propped a baby bottle, filled with milk, on one side of the bed. Augustine's wife rolled the sarong down. A rat-sized object lay on the tiny bed, resting its head on the pillow. It took me a few seconds to register that I was staring at the shrivelled leathery corpse of their stillborn foetus. It reminded me of the smoked gibbon part suspended on a bamboo frame in the Karen village. The father then lifted the covers and bared the scrawny dark body. 'See, he has a dick', he said with obvious pride.

Thais call these corpses Louk Gorg and some people allege they have special spiritual powers. Augustine's superstitious neighbours believed the mother could receive messages from her baby, and a regular stream of visitors sought mystical advice. His wife's abilities, and the income she made, impressed Augustine. He said there was one other Louk Gorg in Umphang,

now in its teens, and the parents had bought it a motorbike in appreciation of the income it generated.

Treating a stillborn like a live baby is creepy, but believing it can communicate and predict the future is, for me, incredible. Then again, some well-educated people believe that an invisible entity can read minds and a virgin can conceive.

Living in Asia, I have strived to maintain an objective and open mind in the face of disparate beliefs. When I was trekking in Nepal I stopped for lunch in a mountain lodge. I must have swallowed a few flies before I saw part of one in my meal. I returned the unfinished food to the cook and lodged a complaint. Flies clung to every part of the grimy kitchen. In Nepal I had noticed that they appeared to register a level of disgust comparable to bees on honey in western countries. My intrusion and dissatisfaction with the food infuriated the cook, but what incensed him more was my audacity to question his cleanliness. Using simple words and very animated gestures, he told me that western tourists, not Nepalese, maintained filthy habits. He mimed a tourist blowing mucus onto a piece of cloth and then stuffing it back into a pocket, to use again.

One of the more peculiar beliefs in the Golden Triangle is that twins violate incest taboos in the womb. In former times, Akha considered all newborn twins and babies born with deformities or handicaps to be *tsaw caw* (human rejects), and they suffocated them with ash. The parents of *tsaw caw* suffered as well, as they had to leave their village and live alone in the forest for an extended period. They returned to their home with a diminished social status.

Near Mae Hong Son, Padaung refugees from the Kayah State in Burma live in controlled villages. The Padaung are famous for their ancient custom of adding layers of brass rings onto the necks of young girls. The heavy rings cause permanent deformities and 'long necks'. Inside Burma the practice is vanishing, but it continues along the border. Foreign tourists pay to gawk at the 'Long Neck Karen', which encourages the exploitation of the Padaung girls and has turned their communities in Thailand into virtual tribal zoos. The bulk of the money ends up in the bank accounts of Thai entrepreneurs.

# SOMETHING DIFFERENT

**A**t Cave Lodge we like to offer something different for our visitors. Trekking, caving, rafting and camping trips are fun, but they are mainstream adventures. We once contemplated bungee jumping into Nam Bor Pi, the Spirit Well, but the potential for disturbing the forest in the base of the hole concerned me more than the expected profits, so I ditched the idea. Then I came up with elephant riding through Tham Lod.

Karen mahouts in Ban Muang Paem, a few hours walk from the lodge, were already taking tourists on rides in the forest, but they were unsure how their elephants would handle a dark cave tunnel.

Elephants can display unpredictable behaviour if something spooks them or when bulls are in musk. There is a death toll in Thailand from elephants that have run amok and turned on their mahouts or trampled a tourist. In Ban Muang Paem an elephant knocked down a local man with its trunk and stomped on him. He died on the way to hospital. Another time, a horse on the path startled elephants that were taking a group of trekkers from the Karen village to the lodge. They stampeded into the forest while the trekkers clung to their lofty seats. Everyone survived unharmed, but I considered printing out indemnity forms for our guests to sign before each tour.

The cave tour turned out to be popular. The elephants caused no damage to formations inside the cave and the fish devoured the extra food they dropped in the Nam Lang. They dealt with the dark and I deemed the trip safe, until one of the three elephants we used went berserk outside the cave. With its Karen mahout in pursuit, the beast smashed down fences and flattened crops on a wild rampage across Ban Tham Lod. When the mahout caught up,



he plunged his knife into the elephant's flank. The elephant pulled the knife out with its trunk and hurled it at its pursuer, barely missing him.

The mahout's account of the elephant retaliating with anger and intelligence demolished my image of docile dumb giants with clever men in control. A knife-wielding Karen mahout chasing an incensed elephant with a couple of people on its back, while it stomped wildly through the cave, was not my idea of a fun tourist attraction.

Mahouts have since told me elephants can be stubborn, have good memories and are much smarter than they look. They will refuse to work or do what their masters order them if they don't like the task. Running an elephant tour in Tham Lod was too risky, even by my standards.

I dumped another idea for the same reason. I had considered offering bareback rides on water buffalo through the cave. Ong, one of our kayaking guides, assured me that his passive-looking buffs were safe to ride. Then I heard a story of a rice farmer who had pushed his buffalo one ploughed field too far. The overworked beast gored its owner with its horns.

I have abandoned any plans that involve people straddling anything alive in Tham Lod. Riding a bamboo raft through a cave tunnel is exotic and dangerous enough. I like rafting but, after I had smacked my head on the bottom of the Mae Nam Pai, I was reluctant to descend rapids on bamboo again.

In 1999 I invested in four inflatable kayaks for safer white-water trips. Steve Brown, who was at the lodge for another extended visit, had paddled hard boats on rivers in Queensland and could see the potential for kayaking adventures in Pang Mapha.

Steve, a wiry South Australian with a handlebar moustache, had first stopped at Cave Lodge in 1986 and joined me in Tham Mae Lana on the 'wounded bear' trip. Since then, we have shared dozens of tough hikes and caving trips. He has a knack for turning up when things turn bad. He was with me in Tham Nam Tok after Pascal fell to his death. He was visiting another time when my pickup conked out halfway across a raging river near Soppong one night, after a flash flood had washed a bridge away. I escaped out of the driver's window as water poured into the cab. Luckily, a 4WD hauled my truck out before the river swept it

towards the Nam Lang sinkhole. Steve had trained as a diesel mechanic, and he cleaned the flooded engine. He was at the lodge again when my marriage to Diew disintegrated. Diew and I both went through a period of intense stress, and Steve helped us through the worst of it.

Steve and I launched the new kayaks through Tham Lod on the route Gary had tubed in 1985. I learnt basic handling skills, then followed Steve back into the Mae Nam Pai wilderness. I had missed the rapids and primeval forests, the spectacular karst scenery and the opportunities for finding caves. We started leading descents of the Nam Khong and Mae Nam Pai with guests from the lodge, my family and friends. When time allowed, we paddled other wilderness rivers in northern Thailand and Laos.

On one memorable expedition in Laos, Steve, Dave, Nung, her son Oh-O and I paddled on the Nam Hin Boon, seven kilometres through the enormous tunnel of Tham Kong Lo, a spectacular cave that is growing in fame.

We have taken our kayaks on jaunts to the Thai coast and camped for weeks on deserted islands where we supplemented our food supplies with fish and coconuts. Almost 30 years after my close encounter with a shark on Perhentian Besar, I had finally fulfilled my tropical island dream.

# PIECING TOGETHER THE PAST

**T**he Nam Khlong, near the Burmese border in Tak Province, flows through protected forests in an area of spectacular karst. Limestone cliffs line the banks and small waterfalls shower down towering faces into the river. Kingfishers skim the water surface and monkeys chatter in the forest canopy. Cave entrances honeycomb the stone walls of the valley.

On one trip I paddled with Nung and Dave for three days down the Nam Khlong, and we climbed up to every accessible opening in the limestone. On the floor of some caverns we found scores of flaked cobble tools. Prehistoric hunters and gatherers had probably descended the river on bamboo rafts to reach these caves. One cliff rose 100 metres above the river and, near its base, we discovered a gallery of faded prehistoric paintings of people and animals.

Hot-Rock Beach is one of our favourite winter stopovers on three-day descents of the Mae Nam Pai. A thermal spring beneath the beach heats the sand and pebbles like an electric blanket. On my first visit, I climbed a steep slope from our campsite to search for rock art and found distinct red ochre paintings decorating the dry walls of a limestone cliff. I recognised a stylised human, a lizard, a snake and an elephant. Stone tools lay on the floor of the shelter, and hives of cliff bees hung from a higher overhanging rock.

For thousands of years people have climbed up to the hives on rickety bamboo scaffolding. They pegged the bamboo poles into fractures and holes in the cliff and risked bee stings and falls from extreme heights to steal the honey. Honey collecting is now a dying activity, and

these days very few local Shan men dare scale the high cliffs for a pot of honey worth less than 1,000 baht.

People living in the Stone Age painted on a small number of countless thousands of suitable bare walls under protected cliffs and inside caves in northern Thailand. In Pang Mapha I have documented ancient art in 12 localities, most of which are far from a road or walking path. These enduring pictorial records of wildlife, hunting scenes, groups of people, handprints and abstract designs offer a rare insight into life in prehistoric times.

High inside an upper-level cavern in Tham Lod, near the hole where Ian slipped and fractured his skull, a painting of a deer with antlers, and what looks like a bow and arrow, adorns a smooth wall. When I first saw it, the multicoloured masterpiece was in a state of perfect preservation. One day a Shan boy, helping a group of villagers remove graffiti from inside the cave, scrubbed the painting, and it is now an indistinct shadow. A photograph I took in 1985, before the cave cleaning, is possibly the sole remaining image of the deer painting.

Tham Lod and many other caves in Pang Mapha have preserved a fascinating record of the prehistoric inhabitants of the area. The log coffins in the Pi Maen chamber of Tham Lod that I first saw in 1977 sparked my interest in the prehistory of the region and the people who had expended so much effort to bury their dead.

I have never stopped searching for Pi Maen caves and, by 1990, had located more than 80 sites in Pang Mapha. I gained a good understanding of the caves' contents and their antiquity, but still didn't know who had carved the coffin wood. I had helped Peter Graves, an archaeologist from the University of New England in Australia, collect tiny samples of wood from the outside of the log coffins in more than 10 caves for radiocarbon dating in Australia. The dates for 20 samples ranged between 2,200 BP and 1,200 BP, with most samples around 1,600 years old.

Rasmi Shoocongdej, from Silpakorn University in Bangkok, was the first Thai to undertake a detailed examination of the burial caves in Pang Mapha. A generous grant from the Thai Research Fund sponsored a two-year research project that concentrated on compiling a



comprehensive database of all the significant caves in Pang Mapha, as well as studying their scientific and cultural values.

Sally Anderson, an environmental science graduate from Australia, had been a guest at Cave Lodge for two weeks when I offered her a position as my research assistant. Sally and I assisted the Thai geologists, environmentalists, forestry officials and archaeologists for the duration of the project.

We spent much of the first year mapping more than 40 Pi Maen sites in detail, including the exact positions of all the coffins, wood fragments and other artefacts. Surveys of the more complex caves took up to three days to complete.

The prehistoric inhabitants placed some of the log coffins on the floor of a cavern or on natural rock shelves, but they suspended the majority of them on wooden structures, two or three metres above the cave floor. The heaviest coffins required six thick posts to bear their weight. Many of the original posts are still standing upright after more than 1,500 years of interment. The few sets that continue to support coffins are among the oldest intact wooden structures in the world.

More than 100 coffins in the district are from five to seven metres long. The longest coffin measures nine and a half metres from end to end. The task of lifting the biggest coffins up to caves in high cliffs would have required 10 or more people equipped with ropes and ladders.

Artisans fashioned the coffins from large trees, usually teak, which they had split lengthways into halves. The hollowed-out interiors of the logs provided space for the corpse and grave goods. Simple carvings, including stylised heads of cat-like animals and pigs, adorn the ends of both halves of the coffins and some of the support posts. Our research catalogued more than 50 styles, some restricted to a single site. Deep inside one cavern we found unsmiling human faces carved on the outside of two coffins.

People shaped the coffins and support posts with small iron chisels and adzes, and much of the ancient timber retains the original tool marks. They left carving tools and sharpening stones as part of the grave furniture for the deceased to use in the afterlife. From floor sediments, we also uncovered corroded rice sickles, knives and spearheads made from iron,

and decorative items that included iron and bronze bangles, bells, cowry shells and beads of coloured glass and stone. In a few drier caves we found thin fragments of carved teak that were once part of large lacquered containers. Resin from mai huk, a common deciduous tree, coated these showpieces of the prehistoric woodcarvers' skills.

Most Pi Maen cemeteries contain shards of distinctive pottery. To strengthen and shape the wet clay, the potters beat it with a wooden paddle wrapped with pleated cord. In one cave with a single coffin we collected fragments from more than 30 cord-marked pottery vessels. From a few sites we removed intact shallow bowls and globular cooking pots that were black from use.

Inside a cavern near the Burmese border, we photographed a complete human skull that an ancient flow of calcium-rich cave water had cemented into the flowstone floor. The skull had probably fallen onto the floor from a suspended coffin. Rows of teeth lined the rock-bound jaw of the long-departed highlander.

Elsewhere, we found incisor teeth with metal decorations in their sides. Rasmi Shoocongdej established that the inclusions were either silver or a mixture of gold and silver. The prehistoric dentists in Pang Mapha had bored up to three holes into each tooth with primitive drills before implanting the studs. 'The Land of Smiles' has very ancient roots.

Sally and I devoted much of the second year of the project to developing guidelines and strategies for effective protection and conservation of the natural and cultural treasures we were finding. Our database detailed each cave's attributes and the perceived threats it faced. We highlighted particularly sensitive sites that require intervention to maintain their integrity.

I felt concerned that the planned public release of the complete database, with the exact coordinates of cave entrances, could become a looters guide to Pang Mapha and compromise our focus on protection. The other researchers agreed that we should restrict access to the information in our final reports.

The prehistory of Pang Mapha captivated Rasmi, one of Thailand's most active and eminent archaeologists. She attends regional and international conferences, where she has gained recognition and respect from foreign archaeologists familiar with Asia. When the cave

database project concluded, she sought further grants to continue her investigations in Pang Mapha.

Long before humans first set foot in Thailand, acidic water was dissolving its way into cracks in the soluble limestone, carving up the landscape and creating caves and overhangs where tigers, bears, serows and porcupines slept. When the first hunter-gatherers settled in karst areas, they also sought natural shelters for protection from the elements.

People in prehistoric Pang Mapha used more than 50 cave mouths and cliff overhangs for shelter. The compacted floor sediments in these places have preserved abundant evidence of long-term occupation. Ash from ancient fires, animal bones, shells, stone tools and the waste rock from their manufacture have accumulated into successive layers. Rock art graces the walls in 10 of these sites.

Chester Gorman, an American archaeologist, conducted detailed excavations at Tham Pi Maen (1966) and Tham Boong Hoong (1972) in Pang Mapha District. He further excavated Tham Pha Chun (1973) in Pai District. When Gorman initiated his research, he hoped to discover evidence for the beginnings of agriculture.

Local Shan gave Gorman's most famous site the generic name of Tham Pi Maen, which Gorman shortened to Tham Pi, or Spirit Cave. I took Rasmi's research team there, and we mapped the cave and measured the remains of more than 10 teak coffins in three connected chambers. Gorman had dug into the floor sediments below the coffins in the middle cave and assigned a date of approximately 12,000 BP to the lowest level of cultural deposits. In the sieved sediments he found flaked stone tools and bone fragments. In the highest layers he uncovered ground stone tools and shards of cord-marked pottery.

In some of the lower layers Gorman identified the remains of carbonised seeds, including a few from the bottle gourd. Archaeologists disagree on whether the seeds were from wild or cultivated plants, but gourds are not native to the area. Dried gourds make light, waterproof containers that, in areas devoid of bamboo, are the best plant receptacles for holding and carrying water. People walking across Asia from Africa, and later to the Americas, probably carried the seeds with them and planted them near their campsites, more than 10,000 years

ago. Although Gorman didn't find the origins of agriculture in Southeast Asia, he did find evidence of the early domestication of plants.

Rasmi excavated two more rock shelters that contained evidence of use by hunter-gatherers. Her first dig was at the base of a semicircular white cliff, high above the final sinkhole of the Nam Lang. A score of Pi Maen coffins, including the longest in the district, rest under the rock overhang in this imposing site. Rasmi's team of young archaeologists unearthed a 9,000-year-old flexed human skeleton in one of their excavation pits.

Rasmi's team then dug into the floor of an overhang close to Tham Lod. This small living space yielded thousands of stone tools and flakes, mounds of animal bones and another skeleton from the oldest known burial in northern Thailand. The human bones lay less than one metre beneath the floor of the shelter, but preliminary dating indicates they are 13,000 years old. The cultural deposits continued down to the five-metre level, which raises the possibility that the first humans settled the area around Tham Lod more than 20,000 years ago.

Prehistorians studying early cultures in Southeast Asia presume weathering and erosion have eliminated or obscured evidence of Stone Age settlements near streams and on hilltops. Investigations have focused on deposits in rock shelters and caves, and some researchers have concluded that hunter-gatherers favoured such places. This belief has encouraged a research bias towards sheltered sites and helped perpetuate another presumption – that small numbers of hunter-gatherers spread across the landscape.

In 2000 Steve Brown and I climbed a limestone pinnacle near Tham Lod to rise above the forest canopy for a 360-degree view. On the peak we found three large water-worn cobbles. The reason why people had scaled the razor-sharp limestone and left these heavy round stones intrigued us. We climbed another 17 pinnacles near the Nam Lang to look for more stones. River cobbles topped 12 of these peaks and on five pinnacles we found associated flaked stone tools and coarse pottery. In a conference paper I wrote about these sites, I concluded that hunter-gatherers had used the pinnacles for some sort of ritual or ceremony. They may have left the stones as raw materials for their deceased relatives to fashion into tools in the spirit



world.

Our discoveries inspired us to search for more stone artefacts away from the karst. Within five kilometres of Tham Lod we identified more than 80 open-air habitation sites on ridges and hilltops. Stone tools and waste debris from their manufacture litter virtually every well-drained flat space on ridges that have a seasonal or permanent water source nearby. We discovered most of the pebble tools at an elevation of between 700 and 1,000 metres above sea level, on ridges with a thin forest cover of pine or deciduous dipterocarp. The density of the sites indicates that the prehistoric population may have been much greater than the scant evidence from caves has implied.

Hunter-gatherers camped in highland areas during wetter times of the year when springs and headwater streams were active. They would have used a network of ridge paths to access wide areas in their search for food. Humans have always sought a comfortable place to live. Sunlight beams between the open forest on mountain ridges, and cool breezes help dry out the ground in the wet season. In contrast, the thickly forested areas in stream valleys turn into inhospitable environments. The dense canopy, lush undergrowth, muddy ground, constant dampness and the threat of flooding would have discouraged riverbank camps. The presence of leeches, snakes and swarms of mosquitoes would have further influenced people when choosing a living site. The people who established highland camps near Tham Lod possibly also enjoyed longer lives. Malarial mosquitoes bite between dusk and dawn and are less likely to breed above 900 metres.

At the end of the wet season the hunter-gatherers moved down into the valleys and established their camps near streams. During the dry season the riverbanks are pleasant places to live, and are close to water, aquatic resources and a rich supply of edible plants.

The prehistoric inhabitants fashioned their stone tools from rounded river pebbles and cobbles. The toolmakers used a hammer stone to strike off flakes and create a sharp edge. Archaeologists describe this technology and its practitioners in Southeast Asia as 'Hoabinhian'. The term derives from a province in Vietnam where French researchers first identified these distinctive tools.

The trademark artefact of the Hoabinhian is a 'sumatralith'. The name comes from cobble tools archaeologists unearthed in Sumatra. In Pang Mapha people made this common tool by flaking all the way around the edge of a flattish, oval, quartzite or basalt cobble, about the size of an adult's palm. Sumatraliths are easy to fashion, but in their raw state they serve little practical purpose.

Ed Richardson, a young English archaeologist, assisted Rasmi for two years. Ed joined me on numerous long walks into the karst hills and along ridges in search of artefacts. We also expended many hours flaking river stones. Ed and I made many sumatraliths and fastened our best examples onto bamboo shafts with bark from the bor tree. Highland people use this tough bark for binding and for pleating into a durable rope. We used our hafted sumatraliths like an axe to chop and split bamboo. The success of our experiments supports a hypothesis that working bamboo was the intended function of sumatraliths. For thousands of years Hoabinhian tools remained unchanged, which implies advances in technology occurred on bamboo rather than on stone.

The Neolithic revolution in Southeast Asia coincided with the introduction of rice cultivation and the domestication of animals, which necessitated the establishment of more permanent settlements. A defining factor of the Neolithic Age is the utilisation of edge-ground stone tools that replaced the chipped and flaked tools of the hunter-gatherers. Neolithic axes have a more uniform and thinner edge than sumatraliths, which made chopping and working bamboo simpler. The user could also sharpen them with ease. Larger versions enabled the Neolithic farmers to clear forests for cultivating dry rice.

Neolithic village sites from 3,000 to 5,000 years BP are hard to find in Thailand, and most evidence for their existence comes from graveyards. I have identified eight Neolithic cemeteries near Cave Lodge. The first one I found occupies the top of a steep-sided limestone outcrop next to Ban Tham Lod. The gravediggers lacked metal tools and would have found the soft soil trapped between masses of exposed limestone easier to excavate than the hard-packed earth on hills and ridges away from the karst.

Moles have burrowed deeper than a metre into the sediments that accumulated on the

outcrop, and in their tailings I found edge-ground stone tools, a few bone fragments and crude pottery with cord-marked and incised designs. I found similar artefacts on the surface of many large pinnacles near the lodge.

Prominent archaeologists have proposed that available evidence lends support to a theory that Neolithic rice farmers, speaking Austro–Asiatic languages, expanded from an original homeland in southern China into present day Thailand. The proponents of this theory claim the language of the immigrant farmers replaced that of the indigenous hunter–gatherers.

For more than 20 years I have suspected that the ancestors of the Lua constituted the original Hoabinhian settlers in the hills of northern Thailand. Lua language belongs to the Mon–Khmer subgroup of the Austro–Asiatic family. I believe this family of languages originated 20,000 or more years ago in cave mouths and countless open-air sites scattered across the foothills of the Himalayas, from India to Vietnam. The first rice seeds probably did arrive from southern China, but nobody replaced the aboriginal people and their languages in the mountains of northern Thailand. I look forward to a time when geneticists can isolate DNA in prehistoric teeth or bones and confirm that the Lua people of Mae Hong Son Province are indeed the descendants of the first inhabitants.

Evidence that supports the possibility of uninterrupted habitation in Pang Mapha for more than 10,000 years continues to accumulate. Bill Fanning, a regular visitor to Cave Lodge, chanced upon a burial from the Bronze Age inside a high limestone outcrop east of the lodge. The day after his discovery I descended into the cave on a rope. Inside a side chamber, layers of flowstone had cemented the base of a large ceramic urn. Nearby, a calcite formation encased a human thighbone. I reached under rocks near the pottery and pulled out a bronze spatula with a small humped bull on one end. Radiocarbon analysis on bones from the cave gave a date of 3,000 BP, more than 1,000 years earlier than Pi Maen coffins from the Iron Age.

Abandoned cemeteries and settlements from the historical period of Lanna, a Northern Thai Kingdom centred in Chiang Mai, add another element to this continuum. Remains of Buddhist temples and chedis (pagoda-like cones of clay bricks) lie in ruins near the few areas in Pang Mapha that are suitable for farming irrigated wet rice. Local Shan and other

highlanders claim Lua people constructed these monuments.

Peter Graves, who had collaborated with me on dating the Pi Maen wood, has a special interest in burials and Lanna ceramics from highland areas southwest of Chiang Mai. In the 1980s bulldozers cutting roads into the hills south of Mae Sot near the Burmese border uncovered the graves of mountain dwellers who had populated the region from around 500 to 700 years ago. The discovery of valuable antiques in the burials led to a rush of plundering and trading. Highlanders dug into thousands of distinct mounds of earth set within circular shallow trenches that ranged in diameter from 3 to 20 metres or more.

Superb ceramics from the kilns of northern Thailand, China, Burma, Vietnam and Cambodia flooded the international black market in antiquities. Before the unearthing of the highland mounds, significant finds of similar ceramics were restricted to shipwrecks on the ocean floor. Along with the ceramics, the diggers found gold bars, silver jewellery, glass and stone beads, swords and tools, clay pipes and lacquerware.

Millions of baht changed hands when lowland dealers arrived in the hills and encouraged the looting. Lisu, Lahu, Hmong and Karen farmers searched hundreds of kilometres of ridges on the western border ranges for burials and, in less than a decade, they had dug up thousands of mounds. Archaeologists arrived too late to excavate even one undisturbed site.

When trekking in Pang Mapha, I had seen concentrations of broken Thai and Chinese ceramics near mountain trails. Tribal elders had related stories of the peoples that preceded them, and they said Lua people, the first settlers in the hills, had left the ceramics.

A large number of Lua had once occupied the mountainous terrain from Burma's Shan State to Kanchanaburi Province, west of Bangkok. Most of the Lua moved out of the region about 400 to 500 years ago. A possible reason for their exodus was the fighting between the Northern Thai and Burmese armies. The Lua, living in the midst of the strife, possibly fled forced conscription and persecution. The Wa people of northeast Burma have close linguistic ties with the Lua people in Thailand. Some ethnologists claim that Wa elders have recounted stories of their ancestors' migration from the south.

When the Tai-speaking immigrants moved down from southern China into present day



Thailand, they set in motion a millennium-long process of assimilation. Many of the citizens of northern Thailand, who call themselves Kon Muang, are descendants of the original Lua settlers, and retain some aspects of Lua culture and beliefs.

Less than 15 relatively unassimilated Lua villages remain in the mountains of southern Mae Hong Son Province. The villagers have maintained their language and much of their identity, including their ancient animist beliefs. Diew and I walked many times, on seven-day treks, to these once isolated villages. In the 1970s the Lua in this region wore handspun, handwoven cotton clothes and lived in distinctive steep-roofed houses. Wealthy families owned elephants, and the elders told us that in the past they had ridden them on yearly trips to Chiang Mai, where they paid respects to the rulers, sold forest products and purchased essentials like salt. When I was staying in traditional Lua villages, I could imagine what it might have been like in Pang Mapha 1,600 years ago.

I visited a cemetery near Ban Chang Mor (Pot Makers' Village), where Karen opium addicts had dug up Lua graves and stolen silver rupee coins. The Lua had left the money in the mouths of their dead to pay the entrance fee to the spirit world. Hollow log coffins lay open on the ground. Carved handles decorated the ends. The vandals had smashed cord-marked pottery and scattered clothing and other possessions of the deceased around the excavated graves.

I persuaded Peter Graves to help me look for ancient Lua burial mounds in Pang Mapha. On our first day we found a group of five mounds. I continued searching and have since recorded another 350 mounds ranging from 3 to 25 metres in diameter. Almost all the burials are above 900 metres, and the highest is 1,540 metres. On one long ridge line near the border, at 1,350 to 1,400 metres above sea level, I counted 195 mounds.

Lua burials in Pang Mapha remain largely intact, but another looting spree could erupt at any time. I have implored Thai archaeologists to conduct a controlled excavation and obtain reliable information on the former residents of the northern hills before the mounds become empty craters. I have also encouraged local officials to promote active community-based conservation.

One Black Lahu digger in Tak Province described to me how he removes antique ceramics from a Lua burial. He digs into the centre with a hoe until he hits the burial, which is usually one and a half metres down. He then pokes a stiff piece of wire into the earth near the head and feet of the skeleton to locate the bowls and plates. He told me he had once dug up a jar containing whisky. I asked him how he knew it was whisky. 'I drank it', he said. He also claimed to have smoked a clay pipe packed with ancient tobacco.

I can sympathise with impoverished highlanders who dig into any mounds they can find near their village. At least they do it out of ignorance of the intrinsic value and historical importance of the burials and grave furniture.

Yet the obliteration of both cultural and natural heritage treasures in Thailand, and elsewhere, continues unabated. The major perpetrators, or their financiers, are in most cases not poor, or ignorant. By the time the rest of the population comprehends what these selfish people have destroyed, there will be little left to save.

# DEVASTATION AND IMPACTS

**F**or three decades I have witnessed the unimpeded exploitation of Thailand's natural assets. The changes generated immense wealth for some people, but resulted in permanent damage to irreplaceable resources.

It didn't take long for the jewel islands of Phuket and Koh Samui to lose their original lustre. Their natural facets have tarnished, and their new attractions glisten like the fake gems swindlers sell on the deckchair-clogged beaches. The chemical stench of suntan lotion and swimming pool chlorine have supplanted the smell of freshly caught fish, copra and salt air.

Uncontrolled development and abuse of the pristine environment that the initial tourists came to see has overwhelmed the inherent beauty of the islands and diminished the charm of their small communities. Simple bamboo and thatched huts with basic amenities have disappeared along with the backpackers. The travellers who inaugurated the influx of foreigners have moved on to Koh Phangan, Koh Tao, Krabi, Koh Chang, Koh Pi Pi and Koh Lanta. The expansion of tourism-related infrastructure followed, and continues to scar the coastlines.

Developers used cement from blasted limestone mountains and lumber from decimated forests on the mainland to build upmarket resorts and opulent hotels on land that once sustained coconut palms, rice paddies and jungle. New waves of wealthy tourists sip imported cocktails, float in artificially blue pools and dine in decadent restaurants. Souvenir shops, mini-marts and beer bars cram village lanes, and noxious fumes from motorbikes and pickups haze the once deserted roads.

Inland areas where the islanders cultivated irrigated rice were once the most valuable plots of land. But the infertile coconut plantations near the beaches now sell for tens of millions of

baht an acre. Even the 2004 tsunami disaster on the Andaman coast couldn't slow the tidal wave of investors. Instead, it boosted the desirability and value of the interior and hilly areas and lent impetus to the tourism-driven onslaught.

On my last trip to Koh Samui I struggled to recall what it was like in 1977 when I was one of the five foreigners lazing on the idyllic Haat Chaweng. Thirty years had passed since the occasional thud of a falling coconut interrupted the sound of wind rustling palm fronds and sand absorbing retreating waves. I walked past wall-to-wall resorts, bars and food outlets teeming with sunburnt farang. Music blared from a hundred amplifiers, and the beach no longer squeaked beneath my feet. I guessed that lotions, sweat, dead skin and filtered sewage had greased the grains. I didn't want to swim in the cloudy water.

The most disheartening aspect was that the unmitigated development was continuing at a frantic pace, and things could get worse. Maybe the locals who sold their land are living comfortable lives, but it's hard to imagine that they found a nicer place than the tranquil paradise they had inherited, and then lost forever.

Greedy entrepreneurs, wealthy coastal developers and poor hill tribe farmers are not the only people who threaten the integrity of Thailand's cultural and natural assets. Many scientists have arrived at Cave Lodge seeking information, and some have astonished and angered me with their routine use of destructive and intrusive research methods.

An ichthyologist told me of a standard technique he employs when conducting a biomass study of fish in a waterway. He pours in a cyanide compound that stuns all the fish in a predetermined area. He nets his floating specimens to identify and measure them, and then guts the fish and examines their stomach contents to gather further information. The scientist insisted studies such as this provide useful data for conservation management, but I voiced consternation at this incongruous justification for poisoning the fish and their habitat. It reminded me of the Japanese whalers' argument that they hunt and harpoon whales to learn more about them.

A Russian biologist joined Richard Borowsky and me on an inspection of a colony of less than 20 *Cryptotora* I had discovered on a flowstone waterfall, three kilometres inside a



cave. Extremely small numbers of these cavefish inhabit two known caves in the world, and I insisted that I would not tolerate any specimens being taken. In a cave west of Bangkok, scientists had bagged every Kitti hog-nosed bat in their only known habitat. Conservationists feared the specimen collectors had exterminated the entire population of the world's smallest bat. Fortunately, subsequent surveys located more colonies of the rare, thumb-sized mammals in 21 other caves nearby, and the newly identified species avoided immediate extinction.

We were filming the *Cryptotora* when the Russian let out an excited shout. The courageous hunter had skewered one of the tiny critters on the blade of his pocketknife and was holding up his kill for us to admire. It took a moment for this blatant disregard of the precarious existence of the new genus to sink in. When it did, I had to restrain myself from grabbing his headlight and running out of the cave. The single thing that stopped me was that he would have inflicted more damage on the habitat if he stumbled around in the dark trying to feel his way out of the cave for the rest of his short life. I settled for a tirade of abuse and told him to find his own way out. I headed deeper into the tunnel towards the distant downstream entrance, 10 hours of hard caving away.

An American scientist, armed with a PhD, a syringe and bottles of dye, came to Pang Mapha to research cavefish. She planned to inject the coloured liquid into all the fish she could capture in a defined part of a cave stream. I told her that puncturing the finger-sized fish with a needle and squeezing in dye was equivalent to jabbing a fist-sized cavity in my body and filling it with litres of untested chemicals.

The purpose of the experiment, she said, was to determine the population of the eyeless fish in the caves. She intended to return in six months and count the chemically coloured specimens in the experimental area. I didn't think this would prove anything.

When I questioned her methodology, she admitted she had already jabbed all of the *Shistura* she could net inside one cave. I asked her what she would think if a Thai researcher, without any official permission, injected an experimental dye into hundreds of troglobitic fish in the United States. I threatened to report her to the Forestry Department if she spiked any more cavefish in Pang Mapha. She left Thailand without completing her research.

When her colleague returned to count the fish in the pool with the Shistura, he saw no coloured specimens. He concluded that either a large, indeterminate number of fish lived in the cave, or the results supported the John Spies interpretation. I suspected the reckless researcher had slaughtered a portion of the endangered population with her intrusive techniques, for nothing more than another worthless academic paper.

Scientists other than biologists employ damaging and invasive methods. Archaeologists are infamous for obliterating evidence in the places they excavate. I'm sure future researchers will be able to obtain more information using a less intrusive approach that causes minimal disturbance, if they can find an intact place to study. They will regard present day excavation methods as destructive and primitive.

One Thai research team drilled into a large number of ancient coffins in Pi Maen caves in an attempt to compile a chronological sequence of tree rings. Establishing a connecting succession of distinct annual growth rings, extending from prehistoric times to the present, would benefit research in various disciplines. Archaeologists, for instance, could compare the growth rings on wooden artefacts with the reference data, and assign very accurate dates. Tree ring sequences can also benefit environmental studies and provide information on former climates.

Wood that is 1,000 or more years old with well-defined annual growth rings is rare in Thailand and other places in the world. The prehistoric teak coffins, however, remain in excellent condition, and the growth rings on teak are more distinct than on most other trees.

To collect the samples, the research team removed wooden cores from the ends of coffins and their support posts. Experts in dendrochronology point out that data from cores can contain inaccuracies because ring widths tend to vary on opposite sides of a tree. Only a complete cross-section of a log can provide reliable information for comparison.

I disputed the validity of this damaging and unreliable coring method at an archaeological conference in Bangkok. I also confronted the researchers inside caves and argued with them while they were drilling coffins, but my protests failed to deter them.

Black Lahu people from Ban Jabo in Pang Mapha put an end to the drilling of Pi Maen

coffins for cores. The villagers heard the deafening roar of a petrol-powered drill in a spacious cave near their village, and a large group climbed up to investigate. When the Lahu saw Thai strangers boring holes in the resting places of cave-dwelling spirits, they arrested them. The Lahu accused the academics of destroying cultural heritage items, and reported the borers to the authorities. They also imposed a fine of 20,000 baht. The community genuinely feared that this violation would cause calamities in their village.

The researchers agreed to pay the fine and cease all further drilling, but later complained that the Lahu had extorted the money from them. I assured them this was not the case, and the fine was light considering the seriousness of their crime. I explained that the village needed the money to sponsor a major spirit ceremony to avert retribution and restore the balanced relationship they try to maintain with Pi Maen spirits.

The drilling team and the Ban Jabo Lahu invited me to attend the ceremony. The men killed two large pigs and the keh lu conducted an extended rite to mollify any disgruntled spirits. The villagers and the hesitant financiers of the occasion squeezed into the headman's house. We sat in a circle on the floor and feasted on mountain rice and dishes of cooked and raw pork.

The direct intervention of the Lahu to protect the local cave resources bodes well for the future. Involvement of local communities offers the best chance for sustainable and effective protection of the caves and karst in Pang Mapha.

The residents of my village are displaying increasing concern and responsibility for preserving the speleothems and biota in Tham Lod. They have resisted developments that might infringe on the cave's natural state. They have also introduced hefty fines for damaging formations and killing cave wildlife.

Careless visitors in caves can break, in a fraction of a second, a delicate formation that may have taken hundreds or thousands of years to grow. But what most people don't realise is that more serious disturbances to cave ecosystems and development processes often result from human activity on the surface, sometimes far from a cave entrance. Opium replacement projects, for example, have encouraged the cultivation of commercial vegetables in watershed

areas for caves. Unrestricted use of fertilizers and pesticides, and diverting water into fields, is altering the quality and quantity of water flowing underground. Road building, dam and irrigation projects, wet rice farming, deforestation, animal husbandry and dumping of wastes can all lead to serious negative impacts.

I have helped document hundreds of remarkable caves in Pang Mapha, and have revealed their fragile contents to the outside world. My conscience tells me I should shoulder some of the responsibility for the plight of these places. I deal with my guilt by promoting cave and karst conservation.

In a frontier province like Mae Hong Son, caves lie within either forest reserves or wildlife sanctuaries under the jurisdiction of the Forestry Department. This department possesses neither the means nor the resolve needed to conserve and safeguard the subterranean wilderness. Just who is in charge in a district like Pang Mapha can be difficult to ascertain. The appointed governor and district officers wield decision-making power on most issues, while some local bureaucrats and politicians think they command enough authority to decide a cave's future. Further complicating the issue, the Thai army exerts considerable influence in border regions and oversees several caves. Meanwhile, the real stakeholders – the local communities – strive for more say in managing the natural resources in their immediate area, a right that has been enshrined in various constitutions.

I have talked to them all and have presented comprehensive lists of caves, detailed management proposals, videos and photos. The concept of cave conservation is hardly controversial. Anyone can comprehend and agree to the simple logic behind the arguments, but translating this into active protection is not so easy. It seemed that every time there was a change in government or local officials, the struggle to protect the caves had to start all over again. There had to be a better way – and a little help from Thai royalty.



# ROYALTY

Members of the Thai Royal family have visited Tham Lod. The Royal visitors include Her Majesty the Queen, Her Royal Highness Princess Galayani Vadhana (the elder sister of His Majesty the King) and Her Royal Highness Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn. I accompanied Princess Galayani and, on another occasion, Princess Sirindhorn, to the cave, which was a great honour for an Australian squatting in the Thai border bush.

Mae Hong Son officials chose me, the resident ‘expert’ on the local caves, to introduce the Royal visitors to Tham Lod and provide information on the underground resources in Pang Mapha. On both occasions, the preparations for the visits and the security arrangements impressed me. Local, regional and national officials spare no expense when members of the Royal family travel in Thailand. Preparations take months, and on the day of arrival, hundreds of police and soldiers provide security. They line the route the Royals will use and seal the areas they visit.

Princess Galayani was a lovely person with an impressive grasp of languages and a broad wisdom gained from a lifetime of study and travels abroad. We conversed in English, and Her Royal Highness articulated a genuine interest in the attributes of Tham Lod and other caves in the area.

Thai people love and respect Princess Sirindhorn. Like her father, His Majesty the King, whom she has accompanied to every region in the country, the Princess is devoted to the people of Thailand. Her extensive exposure to the issues and problems confronting the nation has given her an intimate understanding of an impressive diversity of subjects. The Princess has also inherited the King’s insight and compassion.

I spent an enjoyable afternoon with Princess Sirindhorn. I presented a slide show and answered questions on cave-related topics. We shared lunch and then I led the Princess and her entourage on a tour through Tham Lod. We conversed in Thai, and the Princess expressed interest in formation processes in the cave, the ecosystem and biota, the archaeological remains, conservation issues and my life in Thailand. The Princess wrote down the information on a ledger as we talked. I conveyed my concerns about the lack of effective management for the caves and karst in the district. I also presented the Princess with a selection of photographs I had taken in Pang Mapha caves and a conservation video. The video that Diew and I had produced emphasised the vulnerability of Tham Pha Mon and Tham Mae Lana and threats to them. Soon after the Royal visit, the Thai army restricted access to both these caves to protect and preserve them.

# ANY EXCUSE

When life at Cave Lodge gets too serious, we do something just for fun. We like to party, and find plenty of excuses. Apart from Christmas, New Year and a multitude of birthday parties for our children and staff, we can also celebrate Thai, Shan, Lisu and Lahu festivals. Special occasions such as a full moon or a rare extraterrestrial anomaly provide more reasons for revelry.

The main house and our field by the river are ideal settings for big gatherings. A bonfire, music, fireworks, intoxicants and Shan torches are all we need.

When mountain-dwelling Shan celebrate on a moonless night, they make gigantic bamboo torches to light up their village. Men bind long lengths of dried bamboo together, wrap them with freshly split bamboo panels, poke resinous pinewood into one end, and then plant the bundles in holes in the ground. Flaming pinewood, on the end of a long piece of bamboo, ignites the tops of the six-metre torches. They burn down slowly and emit a warm glow over tens of metres.

We stuff our bamboo torches with firecrackers that are illegal in most countries, including Thailand. They resemble the bungers neighbourhood vandals crammed into mailboxes on cracker night when I was a child. Thai people also make baked clay balls and pack them with up to a kilo of gunpowder. I conceal them inside the top of the wrapped bamboo.

When NASA determined that the Thai–Burma border region was the ideal place to view the Leonid meteorite shower, we printed Space Party posters. We invited all space cadets and star freaks to a high mountain overlooking Burma and guaranteed that meteorites would streak the night sky until pink pre-dawn mist filled the valley. Over 100 psyched people joined us on the mountain top and primed themselves for the cosmic shower with some

dedicated mental preparation. We lay out on freshly harvested rice straw in a Lahu field and made primitive noises as the spectacle got under way around midnight. The shooting stars showered down until dawn, when a panoramic sunrise lifted us off our backs. A year later, Leonids returned and crashed our party by the river.

On that night the crowd's anticipation of the show was as spiked as our Shan torches. We lay on mats in our field. Wisps of winter mist drifted above the Nam Lang, and the flaming bamboo tinted the vapours with a rich yellow hue. Intermittent explosions echoed off the hills. When the flames burnt down to a wick, the clay balls erupted with a volcanic, 10-metre plume of golden sparks. We pumped up the music and people danced around the roaring spray. Meteorites crossed the sky, leaving trails and after-images in silvered reds and greens, and people whooped and whistled until daybreak.

The most spectacular Thai festival is Loy Krathong, which the nation celebrates on the full moon in November. A krathong is a small leaf boat holding a candle, and people place them on the nation's waterways. The ancient cities of Chiang Mai and Sukhothai celebrate Loy Krathong with fervour. Girls in Thai costumes ride illuminated floats in extravagant parades, while monks and lay people release hundreds of glowing paper balloons that rise into a sky speckled with exploding fireworks. Tens of thousands of krathongs drift on rivers, khlongs and lotus ponds. When lovers float their krathongs together, they can predict how long their flame will last.

We instigated one memorable Loy Krathong festival in Tham Lod. Each of our guests created a krathong from a slice of banana stem, bamboo, folded leaves, flowers, a lighted candle and sticks of incense.

Brilliant moonlight bathed the cave entrance as we placed our krathongs on the Nam Lang and watched them drift underground. The floating candles illuminated the cavern walls and reflected on the water. We followed them inside until they vanished around a bend.

I invited the group to follow me in deeper to the Big Column Cavern. Billions of drips and splats had created the 22-metre-tall calciferous union of a stalactite and a stalagmite that dominates this chamber. Ambient light from dozens of candles highlighted the formations in



the cavern, while music from a guitar and flute resonated off the stone walls. The crowd was ready to dance, and I put a tape in a portable player.

A German girl asked me if I liked oriental music. She gave me a tape, said she would change into her costume, and then stepped out of sight behind the Big Column. I told the group I expected a performance to begin and pressed the play button. Melodious eastern music filled the cavern and everyone fell silent. The acoustics were superb, and the sounds resonated off the walls and dangling formations. We stared at the massive column that concealed the mysterious girl, each with our own expectations. Dark shapes between the cave's glistening rocks and irregular growths swayed in the candlelight.

We gasped in surprise when, out of the blackness, a Turkish belly dancer in a shimmering turquoise costume, complete with wobbling bells and sequins, floated into view. In hypnotic silence, we marvelled at her sensual movements, her exquisite costume, and the multiple shadows from candles playing on the cave walls. The enthralling performance inspired the crowd, and we danced together beneath the stalactites.

The head of the Forestry Department at Tham Lod had joined us for the Loy Krathong festivities and the cave party, and he told me he enjoyed it immensely. Next morning he requested we never hold another one in Tham Lod. He said the column cavern is an excellent place to party but, if he allowed us to use it, he would have to give permission to other revellers. Regular parties, he reasoned, would trash the cave. I saw his point and was glad he had raised it.

As the new millennium approached we began preparations for our biggest party ever. The Y2K computer clock 'fuck-up' had increased the possibility of an accidental nuclear war, and we had to prepare for any eventuality. We intended to arm ourselves with an effective deterrent that our enemies could see from spy satellites, the space station and the space shuttle. The plan was to upgrade our Shan torches into intercontinental ballistic missiles and equip them with side boosters and more armaments than ever. To deter a first strike on the Golden Triangle, our missiles had to look formidable.

Lodge guests and I scoured the neighbourhood for raw materials. American guests prepared

‘napalm’ for us. The recipe is so easy infants can make it; you simply dissolve styrofoam in benzene and stir away from naked flame.

With lots of technical help from the rocket scientists and nuclear physicists who stayed at the lodge, we erected three missiles aimed at the heart of darkness, which was somewhere beyond our horizon. We also collected a truckload of dry rice straw and wrapped it with wire to spell out a big 2000. We slapped on our napalm, impregnated the numbers with fireworks that looked like sticks of gelignite, tied on bags of petrol, suspended it high and buried spark bombs beneath it.

The evening approached and we were ready. Our missiles poked out of their launch holes and looked ominous. Bamboo bazookas slung from our shoulders. Latecomers arrived, and I convinced them our missiles were capable of lift off. They knew I was lying when I raised a bamboo lighting rod and ignited the top rather than the bottom of our smallest rocket. Afraid it might explode on the launching pad, I warned everyone to stand well back. The pinewood wick ignited. Within seconds, the first mega-crackers went off and a few unsuspecting onlookers almost soiled their pants. At midnight we loaded the bazookas with skyrockets and Roman candles that shoot coloured balls.

Everyone was pretty out of it by then, but those who could took turns and fired at our 2000 symbol until it ignited into a roaring, blasting, spark-flying, napalm-sizzling inferno. Wow! Complete pyromaniac madness. Then the party got going.

We have moved along since 2000 and have upgraded to ‘pyrotechnic-plus’. We didn’t plan on introducing a flaming lady-boy, but when our first eight-metre-high burning symbolic man ended up with dangling explosives-stuffed straw genitals and petroleum nipples, its gender became debatable. Then I politicised our straw kratoy with a ‘Burn Bush’ sign on its sticky napalm-scented bush and transformed it into a real target. I outfitted the bazookas to fire skyrockets with exploding heads that the Thai call vweet-boom, after their screeching flight and the explosion that ends it. With the increased firepower, we could blast bits of straw testicle over a wide area and put holes in Bush’s head.

The novelty of it all appeals to our more impulsive guests. On one Christmas Eve, though,

we raised eyebrows when we propped up a six-metre-high straw Santa Claus in front of the house. After dark, with bellies bloated on a full roast dinner, Christmas pudding and custard, and brain cells pickled with far too many litres of wine and whisky, we fired hundreds of rockets and coloured balls into Santa until the remaining fragments flared bright against the night sky. Some of our guests were not ready to cut the cord, but I figured the real Santa is indestructible.

We heard his loud snoring in the guest's dormitory on Christmas morning. We propped him up, poured in whisky, dressed him in his costume and got him to repeat his lines before he realised it was not a bad dream. By the Christmas tree, in the early morning mist, the lodge's reluctant Santa performed brilliantly, and our children and their friends from the village had cotton wool in their eyes for another year.

# EVERYDAY LODGE LIFE

Pang Mapha was untamed and bordering on unsafe when Diew and I established Cave Lodge. A flood of modernisation had already engulfed the Thai cities, at a rate that defied belief, but the deluge slowed to a trickle in distant rural regions. Development projects were just beginning to plant the imported seeds of change in the highlands along the northern borders.

For the first few years we worried that rebel army deserters would turn up one night and ransack our house or kidnap guests. I doubted I could scare them with threats of aerial bombardment by the Farang United Army. We planned to hand over whoever or whatever they demanded. Our fears never materialised and no intruders from Burma ever threatened the lodge, although Shan United Army soldiers did cross the border a few times and rob people on the highway.

The region we live in retains its rugged splendour, but it lacks the feeling of imminent danger that once pervaded the border hills. As I write my memoirs, 20 years have elapsed since Ewa died and the police eliminated the chief suspect. It appears as if their zero tolerance approach worked. The leftover bandits and lurking rapists who preyed on farang either perished long ago or moved south. Tourist safety further increased when Pang Mapha upgraded to a full district, complete with a new administrative office, hospital, high school, police station and double the number of police. At least I thought it did until January 2008 when a police officer in Pai shot two Canadian tourists.

When guests tell Nung and me what a great place we own, and remark on how relaxed and stress-free our life appears, I smile to myself. They have no idea how much we've been through to have survived this long.

With hindsight, it now seems ironic that Diew and I first settled in Ban Tham Lod to escape the stress and increasing complexity of city life. We chose an isolated place where we could enjoy a simple and peaceful life in a clean environment. We didn't know what we were getting into.

Local police and forest rangers were the first uninvited non-paying guests to interrupt our solitude. Since then there has been a constant flow of other district and provincial officials, innumerable TV crews, academics and scientists from a dozen disciplines, politicians, journalists, students and teachers – all with their own agendas, all wanting something from us.

I am, on most occasions, diplomatic and helpful with lodge guests, but one refined visitor from England described my language (I think it was the language) as 'uncouth'. I had to look in a dictionary to ascertain the subtler connotations of this insult.

Some people just misunderstand Australian humour. Innocent questions such as 'Do you have any free rooms?' or 'How many undiscovered caves are there around here?' beg a sarcastic response.

People have asked me to help them find a Shan wife ('Find your own'), drugs (same as a wife), land in the village (same as drugs), the secret of happiness (more drugs and wives) and all sorts of other mundane stuff, like directions to Tham Lod.

I have to say something when a guest pulls a grimy money belt out of the front of their pants and tries to hand it to me for safekeeping. Some travellers infrequently wash their underwear, let alone their money belts. I'd rather not handle a cotton rag infused with six months of pubic sweat. I hold open a plastic bag for such objectionable deposits.

Apart from dealing with guests, I carry out a range of other tasks on a typical day at the lodge. I could be splitting firewood, weeding or watering the garden, cleaning drains and blocked toilets, or chopping bamboo in the forest. Every two weeks or so we drive to Chiang Mai, sell our recyclable rubbish and fill the pickup with vegetables, frozen meat, dried foodstuffs, baking materials, building supplies, and dozens of smaller items for repairs and upkeep.



Sporadic construction and frequent maintenance work consumes a major chunk of my time. The main house at the lodge took two months to build, but improvements and renovations have continued non-stop.

It was a sad day when we upgraded the floor of the lodge to teak planks. Years of foot-grease had polished the bamboo skin on our floor to a rich tanned lustre. The springy panels were comfortable to walk and sprawl on. When the lodge was partying, and the crowds were dancing, we generated a boisterous bounce in our flexi-floor. But the jumping on our bamboo trampoline climaxed one time with the collapse of the floor supports.

For the first eight years at the lodge we lived without electricity. Kerosene lanterns and candles provided light and the rover's battery powered our tape player. Guests ate communal vegetarian meals that we cooked with firewood from the forest. We experimented with second-hand kerosene fridges, but soon tired of standing them upside down to get their old juices flowing, and lived without refrigeration. When the cables arrived, we laid them underground to preserve the views and then went on a spending spree.

We didn't buy our land; we asked our neighbours if they had any objections, and then fenced off an unoccupied hillside. The other people in our district, including everyone in Soppong, were also squatting without ownership documents. When the Forestry Department drew lines on a map and declared the majority of Pang Mapha a wildlife sanctuary, they probably didn't know there wasn't much wildlife left. The locals, who had lived there all their lives, had already shot and eaten the bigger animals.

Since then, the government's policies have been more pragmatic. The authorities built roads and schools, registered our houses and brought tap water, electricity and telephone wires to our villages. The highlanders have Thai identity cards and free access to hospitals and other services. They elect fellow villagers to local administrative organisations that control budgets and make decisions on development.

District and regional officials recognise the role Cave Lodge has played in promoting tourism in Mae Hong Son. The Thai police, army and forestry officials have always treated me with respect. They have never tried to extort money from us or cause any problems. The Ban

Tham Lod Shan have also given unwavering support and helped us persevere when the going was rough. We maintain excellent relations with our local community and feel very much a part of it.

Repeat guests, who first walked in during the 1980s, say Cave Lodge is the only place in Thailand that hasn't changed much. We do live in a bit of a time warp. I have always made it a priority to preserve the natural setting, our rustic buildings and the laid-back atmosphere of the place. We enjoy waking to the chirping of birds, the gurgling of the river, and the occasional raucous whooping of wild gibbons near the cave. Even a blast from a muzzle-loader tells me there is still something left to hunt.

My passion for caving and exploration has never waned during the decades I have lived at the lodge. One problem with discovery addiction is that as tolerance levels escalate I need to push myself a bit further each time to maintain my excitement. It is hard to kick and, like smoking, long-term exposure can be dangerous.

# WORTH THE RISKS

In March 2005 I headed back into Tham Susa with a BBC film crew to document *Cryptotora* for a Planet Earth television series, which Sir David Attenborough would narrate. More than 20 years had passed since I had found and named the cave. Kerry Hamilton had discovered the waterfall-climbing fish on our 1985 expedition and, on our second attempt in 1990, he had conquered the awesome inner waterfall. Since then I have built bamboo rafts inside the cave, paddled a kayak up the stream, and swum with my family and friends to the underground waterfalls. I will never forget the miserable night I spent in the entrance chamber with the raft-wrecked and traumatised Top Deck tourists. On another trip I guided Thai television celebrities to film the cavefish with an underwater camera. Once, I walked there alone to look for Mark, my British friend who had barely survived Tham Christmas and a truck flattening him on the highway, after he failed to return from one of his solo caving adventures. Mark remains the only person to have reached the cave waterfall on his own. I found him in the jungle, lost as usual, near the cave entrance.

The 2005 expedition with the Planet Earth team was the hardest and most dangerous trip of all. I organised a group of seven Shan men from Ban Tham Lod to help Steve, Dave and me carry the BBC's 450 kilograms of camera and lighting equipment to the cave. We floated the gear down the Nam Khong on kayaks to our riverside base camp, hauled it overland to the cave entrance, loaded it onto more kayaks and then dragged it upstream to the waterfall.

We spent six days in Tham Susa, and the film team captured many hours of high-definition video. Kathryn, the Planet Earth producer, said her editors would cut this footage to 30 seconds for the television series, which translated into one second for every two hours we spent in the cave's atrocious air. She wished Attenborough could have joined us in the cave to

see the fish, but the conditions were far too dangerous for someone of his age.

The BBC team brought safety meters that measured the carbon dioxide and oxygen levels. I had guessed the cave air held around 3 or 4 per cent carbon dioxide, but the constant shrill beeping of the alarms warned that the foul mix we were breathing registered a steady 5 per cent carbon dioxide and 17 per cent oxygen. Fatiguing 12-hour days prompted my oxygen-famished brain to ask why I was there, subjecting myself to such bad air for a mere 30 seconds of television footage. The BBC was paying me, but I doubted any amount of money could compensate for the extreme working conditions. Only when it was over, and I was breathing normal air, did I think the opportunity to observe the *Cryptotora* under bright lights for such an extended period was worth the effort I had expended, and the risks I had taken.

The film crew shared my enthusiasm for the cavefish, which they dubbed 'angel fish'. They said *Cryptotora* was one of the most extraordinary creatures they had encountered during their years of filming wildlife around the world.

The trip ran smoothly, apart from one frightening moment that left me literally breathless. Kathryn wanted to climb the first waterfall and look for further filming opportunities. A veteran of many climbs up the basalt face, I warned her that the rocks were slippery and could crumble in her hands. I instructed Justin, the cameraman, to jump in and save anyone who tumbled into the seething pool below the falls. I hadn't tested it, but I suspected the thin layer of froth covered rocks at the base of the waterfall.

I climbed first to a ledge on the lip, braced myself, and then extended my hand to help Kathryn. She made it to the top and then gripped a piece of rock that broke loose. I watched her plummet backwards, without uttering a sound, off the top of the waterfall towards the plunge pool. I saw, in my headlight beam, the alarm in her eyes as she slammed into white foam.

She sank out of sight. My stomach tightened, my eyes widened and I stopped breathing. The rocks beneath the surface could snap her back. For a brief moment I flashed on an image of Pascal, dead in Tham Nam Tok. Justin dropped his camera and jumped into the pool. Kathryn's head broke the surface and she waded to him.

Kathryn was shaken, but unhurt. She caught her breath, then said she still wanted to see the second waterfall. I admired her grit and determination, and set up a safety line for her second attempt.

Living in Thailand, I have also dived, head-first, into unfamiliar depths. I hit rock bottom at times, but I always resurfaced unscathed and, like Kathryn, never lost my enthusiasm. I have survived all the perilous exploits and catastrophic incidents. At times, I considered choosing an easier path for my family and myself, but we persevered and escaped a mundane existence.

People often express surprise when they find out how long I have stayed in Thailand. My usual response is to ask them how long they have lived in their country. Some ask me why I exchanged what may seem to be a relatively secure and comfortable life in Australia for a more tenuous one near the Thai–Burma border. With Thai people, I smile and say I lost my way in a cave. When farang ask me, I tend to offer another version of the truth, which is reminiscent of my famous line that John Lennon used: ‘Life is what happens to you while you’re busy making other plans.’

When I arrived in Thailand I had planned to stay for two months. After trekking for seven years in the border hills, I still did not intend to settle here permanently. Diew and I thought we would last a year or two at Cave Lodge before someone kicked us out. Now, after living for 30 years in Thailand, I have given up making any plans for my future.

Maybe Janis Joplin struck closer to my reality with her wry remark: ‘Tomorrow never happens, man. T’s all the same fucking day...’ If the future is an illusion and the past is no more than fading memories, then maybe Joplin was right. Whatever, it’s been fun living in an elusive present.

Lennon, Joplin and Hendrix also plunged into uncharted depths, but they smacked into the bottom prematurely. I’ve been fortunate, I suppose.

Close friends, like Dave, read a draft of my story and said they recalled certain incidents and details I didn’t mention. I still enjoy running Cave Lodge and living in my favourite region in Thailand, and I want to avoid banishment, blacklists and anything worse. Life has



been relatively calm for years, and I would love it to stay that way.

I have met travellers who gamble with their lives more than I ever would and stretch the extremities of human capability. One lone Belgian pedalled a heavy steel bicycle to Cave Lodge, all the way from Europe. An American extreme-sports freak roller skated here from Pai after latching onto overtaking pickups for the uphill sections. If daredevils like these keep coming, I might have to update my memoirs.

The thunder of mortars on the border ridges, the crackle of forest fires and the roar of floods in the valley are seasonal sounds I have come to expect. Guests continue to lose their way in the bush, break legs, get sick and worry about spider bites more than motorcycle accidents. At least the hospital is closer now.

The odd remarkable event interrupts the status quo. In 2006 a mudslide on the border thickened the Nam Lang to the consistency of chocolate custard and suffocated all the aquatic life in the river. Every fish in the sanctuaries of Tham Lod and Tham Nam Lang died. The disaster caused me to ponder, yet again, the fragility and vulnerability of life. Not long before this abrupt and catastrophic change, the charismatic leader of Ban Tham Lod, a man I respected and knew well, died from gunshot wounds to the back of his head. The ensuing controversy reminded me of the time after the murder of Toon, his assistant, 17 years earlier.

Lingering uncertainty ensures that life at the lodge is never boring. The constant turnover of guests boosts the unpredictability of each day. Anything could happen and, when it does, it seems to come in waves. If nothing dreadful happens for a year or so, I take it for granted another instalment is imminent.

# GANG FUK AND SOM BOI

**O**n the morning of 31 January 2008 I was sitting by the hearth in the lodge watching the kettle boil. Mist blanketed the Nam Lang valley. Drongos, warblers and minors twittered and chirped in the trees above the river. My Shan staff were sweeping the teak floor. It could have been a winter morning in 1988.

The crunching of tires on the still unsealed road from Ban Tham Lod jolted me out of my meditation. Nung shouted from the kitchen, 'John, mee siang rot mar ner'. My feelings of déjà vu intensified.

Earlier that month an off-duty police officer in Muang Pai had shot and killed a Canadian tourist and wounded his victim's former girlfriend. Some eyewitnesses said the cop was drunk. The culprit had been transferred to Pang Mapha, where he was on active duty and still drinking after work. A few days after the shootings, an English friend on a motorcycle tour found a dead local man tied to a tree by a mountain road north of the lodge. It didn't look like suicide. The incidents were unrelated, but I couldn't stop thinking that more mayhem was headed my way.

Red and blue emergency lights decorated the roof rack of the brown and yellow pickup van that pulled up near the front steps of the lodge. The word 'Rescue' and the logo of a charity organisation appeared on several panels. On numerous occasions I have seen similar vehicles arrive on the scene of a traffic accident before the police and an ambulance. The volunteer staff provide first aid and transfer the victims to a hospital. I call them body snatchers.

The driver, a moustached man with a bulging waistline, introduced himself as Ot, the assistant chief of the Soppong administrative organisation. With him was the headman of Ban Nong Tong, a Lisu village near Soppong.

I waived them back and asked them in Kum Muang what I could do for them.

'John', said Ot in Central Thai, 'we have come to ask for your advice. A Lisu couple from Ban Nong Tong have been missing since 27 January and we suspect they were murdered. We think the people who killed them dumped the bodies into a deep cave hole near the couple's ginger field.'

I felt a sense of relief. It had nothing to do with my guests or me. 'How do you know the bodies are in the hole?' I asked. 'Can you see them?'

'It is too deep to see anything, but a rotten smell is rising out of it', said the headman. 'The missing woman's hair band was on the ground, next to the hole', added Ot.

'How were they killed?'

'We think they were shot in their hut at night. There were shotgun shells nearby and someone had tried to wash blood from the dirt floor.' Ot looked at the headman, who clearly wanted to add more details. 'Behind the hut we found a hoe covered with blood', said the Lisu man, 'and the roof was speckled with it, as if someone had flicked it off their hands'.

'How far is the cave from the hut?'

'More than 300 metres up a steep slippery hill.'

It had been raining for days and the weather had been unseasonably warm. If the dead couple were in the pit, they would not only stink but would be bloated and starting to fall apart, especially if their murderer had hacked into them with a hoe.

'Why don't you call the Border Patrol rescue team in Mae Hong Son? They helped me with the dead farang in Tham Nam Tok and know what to do.' After the recovery of Pascal's body from the base of the waterfall, I didn't want to pull any more corpses out of a cave.

'We called them', said Ot, 'and they are out on a mission and won't be back for a week. The Soppong police said they don't have any equipment and we don't know how to do it. The doctor in Pang Mappha said the air in the cave might be poisonous. Can you please lead the team.'

I couldn't think of a worse combination than a couple of putrid corpses, a deep unexplored pit with potentially toxic levels of carbon dioxide, and a rusty vertical caver whose wife is

petrified of Pi Hoong, the bad death spirit. Before Ot had arrived on my doorstep, I was planning to drive to Chiang Mai and watch my stepson perform in his school's annual play.

'Next week will be Lisu New Year', the headman pleaded, 'and the couple's children miss their parents and want to know what happened'.

I packed five lengths of caving rope, helmets, lights, vertical gear and a butane lighter. Our friend Dave, over for his annual dose of adventure, said he would join me. Nung and Mindy, who was on a semester break from university in Australia, didn't want me to go. I promised Nung that I wouldn't touch a dead body.

We drove to Ban Nong Tong, where district officials, a few police officers and a large group of Lisu men and boys joined us. We continued south of the highway to the end of the concrete road and then started walking in single file across steep clearings planted with carrot and ginger. Some men carried my vertical gear, others struggled up the muddy slopes with two plastic body palettes, and a few lugged car tyres that I assumed were for an on-site cremation.

The Lisu men leading the column veered upwards from the last field into pathless forest littered with craggy limestone outcrops. I could smell the cave hole before I could see it, and the stench of rot was almost nauseating.

Clinging with one arm to a tree trunk that leaned over the hole and holding my nose with my other hand, I stared into the black depths of a five-metre-wide cavity. I shone a spotlight into the vertical abyss but couldn't see any bodies, or the bottom of the pit. I tossed a big rock into the hole and heard a dull thud as it landed, I hoped, on dirt.

The onlookers, a motley group of older men wearing traditional blue or green baggy pants and youths in jeans, some with long hair bleached orange, squatted around the hole, holding their noses or talking and laughing. 'Hey Dave', I called to my friend, 'Who do you reckon would know of this cave, so far from a road and a path?' Dave shared my thoughts. 'The murderers are probably here with us', he said.

Ot rammed slivers of pinewood into a bamboo tube and tied on a rope. He lit the torch and lowered it into the black depths. The pine continued to blaze at the base, about 20 metres

down. 'Bad luck', said Dave, 'the air is good'.

'Who is going down?' I asked the crowd.

The Soppong police, border patrol police and local officials had clustered in a group. I asked if any of them intended to rope down. There were no volunteers. A group of Lisu men pushed forward a large, vacant-looking, middle-aged man. 'He doesn't look the full baht', I said to Dave.

'No person in their right mind would ask to go', he replied.

I helped the barefoot Lisu man into a harness and asked the man next to him to lend him a pair of shoes. As I tightened the straps, I explained in Kum Muang that we would lower him slowly into the hole. His friends translated my instructions into Lisu. The man said he had never done anything like this before but he wasn't scared because I would be going with him. When I explained that my plan didn't include me, he dropped the harness and said something in Lisu that obviously meant 'no way'.

A relative of the missing couple stepped forward and said he would give me 5,000 baht if I retrieved the bodies. I said I didn't want money; I just wanted a volunteer. All eyes were on me.

I dislodged the loose rocks on the lip of the pit with a bamboo pole and tossed down a long caving rope, 11 millimetres in diameter. It was thicker than I needed, but if I was going to abseil into a grave then I wanted a rope that would pass very slowly through my rack. Hunched over, with my chest ascender clipped to my waist belt, I snapped the bars shut and backed down.

When I had agreed to descend, I told the police that I drew the line at lifting rotten bodies onto palettes. The senior officer had suggested that I tie my caving rope under the arms and between the legs of any corpse I found and send it up headfirst. The thought of decomposed hunks of limbs, juice and guts raining down on me as 30 Lisu men yanked the other end of the rope convinced me to uphold my promise to Nung.

About 10 metres down, the stench was almost unbearable. I looped the rope around my rack and shone a spotlight into the gloom below me. Material, the colour of sprouting rice, caught



my eye. It took a moment to register that a bloated cadaver was wearing it. 'I can see a man with green Lisu pants', I shouted to the surface. 'I can't see the woman, but there is a Chinese blanket and some bright cloth near the man.' I snapped a few photos and changed over to my ascenders. I had seen and smelt enough.

The crowd clapped their hands as I climbed out of the hole. Ot said I was a hero, but I knew I had chickened out and avoided the worst part of the recovery effort. The police told me the relatives of the deceased wanted to retrieve the bodies that afternoon and would send someone down. When I asked 'Who?' they said 'Avu' and pointed to a wiry old man with one working eye. I buckled a harness around his waist, tied on two ropes and gave him my helmet and headlamp before he could change his mind. I explained that we would lower him into the cave after the two palettes. The police showed him how to secure the bodies with webbing and buckles.

One Lisu man leaned over the hole and shouted questions and encouragement to Avu, but the replies became increasingly muffled as we slowly let out the ropes.

Fifteen minutes later Avu shouted that the first palette was ready. A score of men hauled it up with ease but it caught near the surface on an overhanging rock. The body was the same one that I had seen in the pit. Avu had strapped him on belly down, but his swollen and bludgeoned face lolled towards me. I said we needed a bamboo pole to push the body off the obstacle. Someone chopped one and handed it to me. Standing on the edge, braced against a rock, I pushed hard against the plastic tray. Ot tied a metal hook onto the end of the pole and, after a few attempts, I managed to catch the palette and pull it towards me.

The body surfaced and the crowd fell silent, apart from a group of female relatives who began wailing. Avu came up before the next palette. He had barely stepped over the lip when the man who had offered me 5,000 baht handed him 500. I stepped in and removed my helmet and harness before Avu could touch them with his bare hands.

The next palette came up easily. Avu had strapped on three grey blankets and a bright Lisu woman's dress, but there was no body. He said he had searched the base of the pit and there was definitely only one body. I asked the man next to me where he thought the dead man's

wife was. 'Maybe she killed him and went to Burma', he said. Ot had told me that the missing woman had several children and an extended family, all of whom were worried for her safety. I thought it unlikely that she would help murder her husband then flee, knowing that she would never see her family again.

The case of the missing woman took another twist when Ot claimed that the woman had been married several times and that her father had disliked her latest husband. The woman, he said, spent most of her time in Chiang Mai and had returned to Ban Nong Tong only to help harvest the ginger crop. They had sold half of the harvest and had more than 10,000 baht in cash with them when the man was shot. The money was missing, but that didn't explain why the murderers had killed the man and then disfigured his face with a hoe.

The villagers placed the body and the blankets on a stack of dry logs and tossed the hook and a few lengths of rope that Ot had brought into the hole. Nearby, a Lisu man was winding my caving rope between his hand and elbow, sniffing it every few metres and scrunching his nose. The rope had twisted around and rubbed into the body when the palette was caught on the rock.

'Pwee', he said. 'Do you want to keep this? Lisu people wouldn't.'

'Chop off the smelliest bit', I told him, 'and I will keep the rest'.

'Aren't you scared of Pi Hoong?' he asked.

Back in Ban Nong Tong, the headman invited us to the dead man's house. Lisu women in traditional dress were waiting as we entered the compound, and they ladled water mixed with som boi leaves, the same potion that Shan and Kon Muang use to dispel Pi Hoong, onto our hands. I scrubbed my palms twice with the slimy leaves but could not get rid of the red colouring from the soil near the pit.

The villagers had erected a tent and tables next to the house and when we sat down more women filled glasses with beer and whisky. I was feeling good until they served the food.

'What is it?' asked Dave.

'That was quick', I said with a straight face. 'I thought they were going to cremate him near the cave.' Before Dave could spew his beer, I said 'Nah, it couldn't be. It's got to be Lisu gang

fuk moo.’ The boiled green pumpkin or fuk looked tasty, but the chunks of half-cooked fatty Lisu moo on cracked bone had a pasty appearance and a strong smell, reminiscent of things I was trying hard not to think about before the meal had arrived. We drank a few more beers, ate a little fuk, left the pork and headed home.

Back at Cave Lodge, Nung was waiting for me in the car park. She told me to remove my clothes in an outside bathroom while she boiled a handful of burnt som boi seedpods from her stash. She had collected the pods from the forest the previous year, before sunrise on the full moon of the fourth lunar month of the Shan calendar (March), an auspicious time for that particular activity. Apart from driving spirits away, som boi pods mashed with water make an excellent shampoo. During storms, Shan burn the pods to produce a scented smoke that drives strong winds and thunder away from their village. But despite the reputation of som boi as a powerful repellent, before I entered our bedroom later that night, Nung asked me to recount the day’s events in detail and verify that I hadn’t touched a corpse.

Over the next two weeks the plight of the missing woman remained a mystery. If she was killed with her husband, I reasoned, then the murderers had probably looked for an easier place to dispose of her body. Lugging the dead man 300 metres up a slippery hill in rough terrain at night must have been tough.

On 14 February 2008 a police dog located the woman’s body in a field clearing, a few hundred metres from the hut where the couple had been murdered. The police officer with the dog said he had jabbed a crowbar into the earth after the dog had started scratching, and it felt spongy. He showed me pictures he had stored in his camera. ‘It was like a mummy, and it didn’t stink until we unwrapped it’, he said as he flicked on a close up of the dead woman bound in a soiled grey blanket. It looked like the bloody blanket from Bungalow 11 that Somchai was holding when he had accused me of complicity in the murder of Ewa.

I trust that my luck will hold out and pictures of my corpse will not end up on a cop’s memory stick. I certainly want to avoid becoming a Pi Hoong in an animist version of hell. I prefer Mindy’s offer – to place my log coffin inside a Pi Maen cave and promote it as a tourist attraction. When I asked her what she would leave in it to entertain and sustain me in the spirit world, Mindy smiled and said ‘som boi’.