

Thailand: Friendly, Fun, and Becoming Less Free (Part 1)

by John Cobin, Ph.D. for *The Times Examiner*

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This column is the first segment of a two-part series commenting on life and liberty in Thailand.

What do you get when you mix the world's friendliest people, a tropical climate, wonderful shopping, overburdened infrastructure, Buddhism, promiscuity, and interventionism? You get Thailand!¹ And in spite of a few of the items on that list, my wife and I enjoyed immensely our December 2005 visit. Not only were taxis super cheap (the other reason to avoid renting a car was the unbelievable traffic jams), but one could get an hour-long foot (or body) massage every day for just a few bucks each session. The hotels were great too: five-star luxury at an affordable price. And you could take a leisurely stroll and buy all sorts of neat items to bring home: such as a few hand-tailored men's suits for \$90 each or a powerful (and scary) Taser weapon for \$20. Yes, you can get the Taser past customs. Just don't try to take it in your carry-on bag (as we accidentally did and had to beg to keep it), but be forewarned that you will have to spend \$50 at Radio Shack to get a series of gadgets that form a voltage adapter to keep it charged.

Indeed, all seems well to the tourist in Thailand, apart from the very Third World-looking airport. We enjoyed buying a few inexpensive aquamarines, rubies, sapphires, and emeralds. You can hardly go wrong acquiring some quality loose stones for under \$100! The shopping for other fine handcrafts, \$25 phony Rolex and Omega watches, framed scorpions and other bugs, vases, and T-shirts with anti-George Bush imprints at the bazaars was also a blast. There sure seemed to be a free market at the bazaars in Bangkok. After walking for four hours you could always find a Diet Coke for fifty cents and a foot massage for two or three dollars.

One of the biggest drawbacks of Thailand was the vibrant sex industry. When you mix a relatively free market and Buddhist principles you evidently get more strip clubs and sex shows in the beach city of Pattaya than Las Vegas, New York, and San Francisco combined. Whenever we took a beachside stroll we saw hundreds of prostitutes—all very charming, unassuming, sweet, and friendly.² (I have heard that Bangkok was even worse.) And Thai women are *adorable*. They are all five feet two inches tall, weigh ninety-five pounds, beautiful, smile all the time, and wear snug ankle-length dresses. They are always sweet, submissive, courteous, and desiring to please you. I am *not* exaggerating. My wife admits that American women—even Christian ones—stand to learn a lot from Thai women.

Seriously, any family would love to be able to take a Thai gal home and store her away until needed for greeting guests and providing festiveness at special occasions. You should see the gals hired by the hotels! Any of them could make a fortune in America just by being themselves at some investor relations division of a Fortune 500 corporation or at any fancy hotel or restaurant chain. We saw a lot of American men in their fifties hanging around with these gals too. Perhaps Thailand is not a good place for a man to go alone, unless he is single and hoping to marry one of these gems—at least after (Lord willing) converting them to Christianity.

Worse than witnessing Thai promiscuity was taking a tour. If you go to Thailand, don't spend much time taking tours. Seeing the king's flowery summer palace is fine, but seeing a dozen different Buddhist temples (most of the older ones with hundreds of decapitated stone idols) and floating for three hours up a polluted river (that features scenery not unlike a river trip from Memphis to Cape Girardeau) is just a waste of time. Besides, it is discouraging to watch so many people lost in their sin and worshipping stone statues and gold-overlaid brass Buddhas twenty feet tall. Some of their Buddha idols are reclining (chiseled to reflect when the "lord" Buddha had gotten old and tired). Many of the idols we saw were regularly shrouded with linen by devotees. It is shocking to see so much idolatry. Then again, it makes

¹ According to the *CIA World Fact Book*, the Thai kingdom was established in the mid-1300s and was known as Siam until 1939. It is the only Southeast Asian country to have never been taken over by a European power. Home to about 66 million people (Thai 75%, Chinese 14%, other 11%), with a literacy rate of 92.6%, most people speak Thai, although English remains secondary language of the elite—a well-known tradition started by the King of Siam, who brought a female British tutor to teach royal children to speak English. (Remember the movie *The King and I*?) Most people are proudly Buddhist (94.6%), and the rest are either Muslim (4.6%) or Christian (0.7%). The country has an area of 511,770 square kilometers, slightly more than twice the size of Wyoming, and its highest peak rises to about 8,000 feet.

² We also saw many establishments with male prostitutes, but were never approached by any of them.

one thankful that he knows the only true and living God, the Lord Jesus. At any rate, my advice is to skip the extended tour and instead enjoy shopping, massages, and Thai food (if you like it).

Speaking of idolatry, let's not forget to mention that America has its own share of it. Maybe not stone ones, but integral to American culture are materialism idols, how-we-appear-to-others idols, welfare state idols, and even political idols like G. W. Bush. I recently taught an online economics course to MBA students at a Christian university and marveled as one vociferous student defended Bush in the same way that she would have presumably defended the Lord Jesus to a Jehovah's Witness. Yet Bush has very questionable Christian credentials with actions that show the fruit of unbelief: aggression (i.e., warfare that is not in self-defense), lying, and violation of constitutional liberties. He certainly has not exhibited "doing good to all men" in the sense of Galatians 6:10 when it comes to stopping abortion, euthanasia, monetary fraud, wealth redistribution, encroachments by the Supreme Court against private property, and extortive taxation. Bush simply does not cut it as a biblical Christian or as a defender of the Constitution.

When Alexis de Tocqueville wrote *Democracy in America* in the 1830s, he was amazed at how the Christian faith pervaded all of American culture. Now America sports a superficial Christianity at best and outright paganism at worst. There is some semblance of Christian heritage alive in the south and parts of the Midwest and west, along with a corresponding yearning for the liberties envisioned by the Founders. That is one reason why I believe the objective of southern independence is both laudable and the only solution to our troubles. We need to separate ourselves from the interventionist-loving, idol serving culture of America's government school and mass media products. What we do not need to do is follow the path of greater interventionism as Thailand is doing, along with the associated perils of corruption and debauchery.

Thailand: Friendly, Fun, and Becoming Less Free (Part 2)

by John Cobin, Ph.D. for *The Times Examiner*

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This column is the second segment of a two-part series commenting on life and liberty in Thailand.

With all the alluring attractions in Thailand, one might also wonder just how free the 66 million Thai people are. Thailand is ranked fifty-fourth in the world in the Fraser Institute and Cato Institute's *Economic Freedom of the World 2005* index—which is *not* very flattering.³ The country was ranked much higher (twentieth) in 1990, and has been falling ever since—especially since 2000. According to this Cato report, while Thailand is not plagued by as many welfare state transfers as other countries and has a relatively "sound" fiat money system, it is still beleaguered by myriad state-run enterprises and a legal system that lacks integrity. It also has excessive tariffs and onerous trade restrictions, as well as hefty restrictions on capital markets, burdensome price controls, lack of competition (especially from foreign firms), and some notable regulatory hassles in starting up a new business. So while the Thai people remain mostly free, they used to be freer and are increasingly becoming more burdened by the interventionist state. That's a shame.

However, activities like Thai boxing and dealing with highly-poisonous snakes have apparently evaded the reach of regulators so far. I went to the ring and saw little Thai men, none of which weighed more than 130 pounds, pummel, kick, and whack each other in eight different matches. To this day, I have no idea why people like to watch boxing. But the king cobra show was much better. Sitting ten feet up in the concrete bleachers at the Bangkok Red Cross anti-venom research center, we were still musing about the snake slide show we just viewed in the seminar room. Then men brought out a king cobra and set him on the ground in front of us. Good thing no OSHA people were around. Or, better yet, good thing the show hosts were trained and the fifteen foot long snake was not aggravated enough to strike the kids in

³ <http://www.cato.org/pubs/efw/> says: "Economic Freedom of the World measures the degree to which the policies and institutions of countries are supportive of economic freedom. The cornerstones of economic freedom are personal choice, voluntary exchange, freedom to compete, and security of privately owned property."

the first row. Next came out some more vicious cobras, hissing with their hoods fully expanded as a man taunted them, along with vipers, pythons, and tree snakes: all deadly. One of the snake-handlers smiled as he held up his hand to show us that one of his fingers had to be amputated after being bitten. The show was marvelous.

Like interventionist America, interventionist Thailand seems to be doing well. In spite of the parasitic activities of the state, Thailand enjoys a well-developed infrastructure, a generally free-enterprise economy, and many pro-investment policies. It has recovered from the Asian Financial Crisis that ended eight years ago, with continued growth rates over 6% per year. However, Thailand's per capita GDP, ranked 97th among all countries, remains mediocre by world standards.⁴ To ameliorate its condition, Thailand has relentlessly pursued preferential trade agreements (i.e., globalist, interventionist ones) with a variety of partners—especially a “Free Trade Agreement” with its largest trading partner: the United States.⁵

Unfortunately for Thailand, its biggest trading partner is fast moving to become a bigger, meaner interventionist state as well. The Thai people seem to be fond of Americans, the widely-despised G.W. Bush being excepted of course, but if they are to truly prosper they need to cultivate more liberty and free enterprise rather than rely on the state's proactive policies to further development. And what America needs is to take a step back from its present diet of neo-fascism and global imperialism and lead by example. American rulers can start by throwing off interventionist “free trade” pacts and allow free enterprise to pave the way to greater prosperity both in America and places like Thailand. Freedom is *not* slavery stemming from interventionism. We do not get better through proactive public policies. All we get is more movement towards fascism and the resultant loss of individual liberty like we are presently experiencing under the Bush administration.

A BBC reporter interviewing me today asked if I really thought that the free market and limited government could really handle the exigencies of the modern world. My reply was that I thought it could and, more importantly, that it could at least handle them more effectively than the wayward state. Of course such notions are anathema to interventionists who have every incentive to keep their jobs and go about finding new justifications for their parasitic existence. So I doubt that my remarks will be carried into the White House or don the airwaves of interventionist Europe. It would be nice if they could at least make it to Thailand before it is too late. In the final analysis, true social and political change must begin with us Americas “buying the truth” (Proverbs 23:23) rather than being gullible and ignorant, standing on principle rather than practicing pragmatism, and pursuing policies of justice and peace with all men.

⁴ Thailand's per capital GDP was \$8,300 in 2005, 97th highest in the world—and not too different from Brazil, Romania, Libya, Turkey, and Iran—and somewhat below the world average per capita GDP of \$9,300, according to the *CIA World Fact Book*.

⁵ According to the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, while Thailand is the United States' 19th largest trading partner (\$21 billion) and its 16th largest source of imports (\$14.8 billion) and 23rd largest export market (\$4.9 billion), the United States is Thailand's single largest trading partner, even ahead of Japan, with two-way trade of \$20 billion. The United States is Thailand's second largest foreign investor, following Japan, with total accumulated investment exceeding \$16 billion. Half of U.S. investment goes for energy and petrochemicals, with the automotive and electronics sectors also being significant. Some of its main products are tin, rubber, natural gas, tungsten, timber, lead, fish, and gypsum. [Source: <http://www.uschamber.com/issues/index/international/thailand.htm>]