

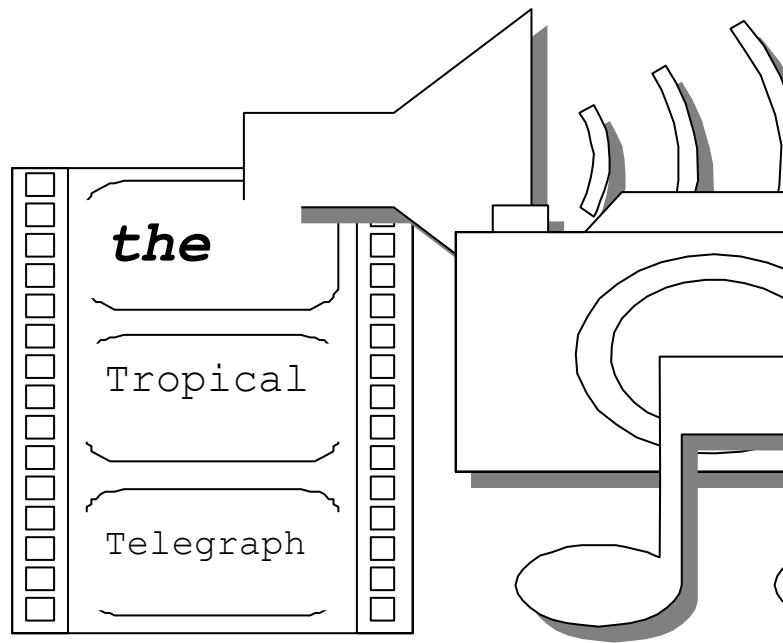


**Chiang Rai, Thailand**  
Christmas 2004 No. 3

**I**t's nearly three years since I left the shores of England and set sail for the East, and as my sixtieth birthday approaches next month, I feel pretty confident that this is where I shall spend the rest of my life. My skimming of the Weekly Guardian, if nothing else, prompts no pangs of nostalgia to return to a country whose affairs seem increasingly distant and strange. We are not immune to the effects of the geopolitics of aggression and greed, but there is a degree of insulation from what seems to be the day-to-day daftness of much of Western affairs.

The sense of social separation has been reduced by the visits of lots of friends, by voluminous email contact and by my occasional stop-overs in London en route for other places. I'm still travelling a great deal, too, and that provides stimulation and excitement, the absence of which might possibly leave me less satisfied if I were here 100% of the time. (Being inactive or unoccupied would be a problem for me anywhere in the world, I guess.)

**W**e celebrated Christmas last year and our second anniversary in Phuket again, and will be heading south once more for the festive season. This year, there's the added incentive of visiting our newly-acquired plot of land in the north of the island, and our friend Jacob from Uppsala will be with us.



**A**t the beginning of 2004, I had nearly three continuous months in Thailand - the longest settled period without travel abroad since I arrived. The rest of the year has been a busy time of travel, including our month's holiday together in Sweden in the summer. We had ten days' wonderful sailing with Ralph and Marie in the Stockholm archipelago. Chai demonstrated his skills as a natural helmsman though it was his first experience of sailing. (We had one very exciting squall which had the rain lashing us and the wind and the turbulent sea throwing the boat around a good deal.)

I've had my first visits to South Africa and China, as well as trips to Australia and Ireland, and several to Sweden: I've been very lucky!

**H**ere, in Chiang Rai, the farm has continued to flourish. After the long, hot, dry season, the rains have brought vigorous new growth to the thousands of trees, shrubs and flowers we've planted on our seven acres of hillside land, and it's now possible to walk about with a sense of being in a nature park with patches of (very) young forest. Some of the 1500 teak saplings we planted last year are four or five metres high already and many of the coconut palms (which started just as sprouting coconuts four years ago) have reached the same height.

It is the most wonderful place: peaceful, unspoilt, with views across rice paddies and

orchards to forest-covered hills stretching into the misty horizon. I always experience a sense of wonder and joy being there.

Early in the year, the roofs of the small buildings on the farm (including our two-roomed cottage) were badly damaged by enormous hailstones in a severe tropical storm. The cement-sheet roofing material was perforated by dozens and dozens of holes like a colander. Now, the buildings have been roofed with hefty cement tiles which should resist any onslaught.

Wherever we decide to have our main residence (currently Phuket, probably), we shall maintain the farm and, no doubt, visit and stay from time to time. It's too beautiful to dispose of and will be a lovely cool retreat from the serious heat of the south.

**O**ur student dormitory is doing well with a high occupancy rate in the twenty-nine rooms. Chai has completed his development and improvement plans, and the place is looking attractive and mature with its new gardens, buildings and decoration. It will never generate big money, but provides a steady, modest income for the owners – our friend Peter McGrady and us. It has a local manager and requires minimal attention. Currently, it is up for sale, as we'd like to use the capital for building a new place in the south.

We continue to live happily in our rented bungalow on the edge of the city of Chiang Rai, our domestic comfort supported by an occasional maid, a driver and the local laundry. Chai often cooks here, especially when there are visitors, and he is an accomplished chef. Like many Thais, we also eat out frequently or buy our food at the roadside and bring it home in plastic bags.

**I** was very lucky to be invited to teach on a ten-day course in Pretoria, South Africa in September. The topic was the introduction of safety monitoring for antiretrovirals used in the treatment of HIV/AIDS on the continent, with participants from eight African countries.

I stayed for four days after the course and took the Rovos Rail train from Pretoria on its 48-hour, 1600km journey across the country to Cape Town. It's the South African equivalent of the Orient Express – expensive, leisured, luxurious – and a great way to see the country. There were, however, morally uncomfortable moments when the train went through local stations crowded with South Africans, or passed the massed, huddled huts of shantytowns, and I was reminded darkly of their economic and social suffering and my immense privilege. (Reminded, too, of the ever-widening gap between rich and poor in every part of the world as social democracy retreats in the face of unrestrained capitalism.)

**D**uring the stay, we had the opportunity of eating the most amazing range of exotic meats, including crocodile, springbok, giraffe, wildebeest and ostrich. We also saw some of them in reserves or in the wild (except giraffes) as well as lions, wild dogs, rhinos and a cheetah. We were assured that the meat came from farms and legally culled animals.

In Cape Town, I visited Robben Island, where we were shown round by a number of ex-political prisoners who had been held there during Mandela's time. We saw his cell and their cells, and the unforgiving limestone quarry where they had been forced to work.

The island has a centuries-long history of being host to suffering: early European adventurers virtually wiped out the abundant local wildlife on greedy victualling stops and colonials later imprisoned local chiefs and their people there; it was a leper colony for a long period (their graveyard is still in existence); and more recently, under apartheid, hundreds of men spent years of their lives as political prisoners. The acceptance of a terrible past and the sense of forgiveness and reconciliation evident in the feelings and views of the men we met were moving and extraordinary.

**T**he occasion of my visit to China was a national conference on drug safety in Shanghai which I was invited to attend as a visiting speaker, partly as a representative

of *the* Uppsala Monitoring Centre and WHO. The duties were relatively light, and, during the week's stay, there was time to explore the sights of Shanghai and for a visit to Beijing (where we also did a little work).

It was extraordinary to be driven from the airport to our hotel along the side of Tianamen Square; to walk a stretch of the Great Wall; to stroll through the Forbidden City and the Ming Tombs; to wander over the peaceful acres of the Temple of Heaven – places (like the Taj Mahal) etched into one's imagination from impressions of one's earliest days (Tianamen Square rather later).

For me, the great paradox of some of these grand achievements of history, in some respects representing the absolute zenith of human enterprise and imagination, is that they usually rise out of the vanity and megalomania of oppressive and authoritarian regimes and rest on the labour of millions of poor, exploited workers. The glory is contaminated by knowledge of its origins and purposes. (The same applies to the pyramids, St Peter's in Rome, the Taj itself, and any number of other great monuments and cities.)

**S**hanghai, and the new twin city of Pudong, is a monument to a comparable urge: the pursuit of profit. It's an astonishing, dynamic, exhilarating place with aspirations to be the new Hong Kong of Asia. Its buildings soar into the skies, many with elegance and originality I have never seen elsewhere. Its 16 million plus population is growing fast and it appears that capital is pouring into the city no less enthusiastically.

The Huangpo river is a busy commercial waterway, thronged with ocean-going ships, barges, ferries and craft of all kinds. The Oriental Pearl TV tower is the third tallest in then world, and the tallest in Asia, and there will soon be a building that beats even the Petronas Towers in Kuala Lumpur.

**M**ost memorable, I think, from the Shanghai region, was the town of Tongli: a hundred kilometres or more from the city, it's a peaceful, historic

town built on a network of tree-lined canals. There are ancient aristocratic and domestic buildings, exquisite gardens; canalside shops and cafés; gondola-like boats for transport of goods and tourists; boats with cormorants (I think) leashed to them for fishing; women doing laundry on steps by the water: a glimpse of another China altogether. Tongli is often likened to Venice: given that Tongli hugely pre-dates the Italian jewel, the comparison should perhaps be in the other direction.

However, a week's impressions hardly leave one an expert on the vastness of China, its people and its history. It does remind one that Western civilisation is rather young in comparison.

**O**ur daily life here in Chiang Rai is agreeably relaxed and undemanding: most days I will spend some time at my computer working, emailing and trying to keep my website up-to-date; we'll go shopping locally in the markets, or go for a drive out into the countryside; maybe spend a day or two at the farm (Chai catching fish for dinner in our pool before barbecuing them); I read a great deal (maybe three or four books in an average week) and we watch films on Chai's big-screen TV. He'll be out with friends playing cards or snooker (he's very good at both), or at the restaurant of some friends where you fish for prawns before having them cooked. There's the dormitory and the farm to be managed – almost exclusively carried out by Chai, with me as adviser and driver.

We go to Bangkok and also Phuket two or three times a year. Chai has lots of friends both in the city and on the island after living there for seven or eight years before he met me. It's his familiarity with the place and the proximity to the sea (which is probably essential for his happiness) which led us to buying the piece of land. Beach-front land was simply beyond our budget, but we're close by.

It's about 1700 sq metres, thickly wooded (its chief attraction for us) with a large pool in the middle. Few land plots for sale have any vegetation on them at all, so we were greatly impressed with the variety and age of the trees

and shrubs. It's on the north west of the island, away from the main tourist centres, and just a couple of kilometres from a 17km white-sand beach. There's just a dilapidated bamboo-thatched hut now, so we're planning to build from scratch – hence the need to sell the dormitory to raise funds.

It will mean a major change in our life, though it probably won't happen for a year or so yet.

Once again, lots of friends have come over to stay with us, and that's been a great pleasure. Jacob is here for a couple of months and seems to be finding the whole experience as exciting and rewarding as I always have done. He's riding about the area on Chai's bicycle.

The other day Giampaolo and Giulia Velo from Verona popped by for a couple of days on their way to the Philippines. We spent one afternoon motoring up the big river here in a long-tailed boat, stopping at a hill tribe village for shopping and an elephant ride; went on to a hot spring further upstream and then came back with the current in the evening sunshine. (Water levels on the river have been their highest for many years, and erosion has been a serious problem: a good part of one village had to be relocated in anticipation of the land disappearing – which it later did.)

I've had a few nights at Culverden Road when I've been en route for other places and had some good times with friends out on the town. The house is still occupied by three tenants – including Ken who must have been there for about ten years now – and has been painted and improved by Alan Whitham on the occasions when he can find time from the demands of his many customers – and from his flying, in which he's recently become fully qualified. (Who says being 60 stops you doing things?!)

I'm happy to report that demand for my professional services continues to be lively, with a great range of interesting activities achieved and on the agenda. I've been editing an English language publication for the Thai government; teaching on a UMC training

course in Canberra; lecturing in China; writing training materials for a South African certificate in pharmacovigilance (drug safety surveillance); helping run the WHO annual meeting in Dublin; writing and preparing a major publication for *the* UMC (along with lots of other projects for them); writing funding applications, policy documents and articles for publications around the world – and lots more. It's all work which can be done at my desk in almost any part of the world, but residence in south-east Asia means some opportunities which would not otherwise come my way.

While enjoying the fruits of (relative) old age very much, I'm also aware that there is a tendency for performance to decline with age, so I'm keeping a watchful eye on what I do for any sign of falling standards: as in the past, I shall want to stop before someone else suggests I should!

Emails and letters from friends remain a great pleasure, and I'm grateful for those many I've received in the last year: I do hope we can keep in contact and – of course – meet occasionally. Thailand really isn't so far. Out of season (May to October) it's quite cheap and simple to get here, and there'll always be a warm welcome!

I hope 2004 has been an agreeable year for you and that the New Year will bring good health and contentment with it.

Best wishes from us both.

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