



THE

# TROPICAL TELEGRAPH

*Greetings and good wishes from Thailand!*

Chiang Rai, Thailand

No. 7 Christmas 2009

It's mid-October as I start to write. The rainy season is fading and what is known as 'winter' is easing in. The days are still hot (around 30C) but evenings and mornings are slowly cooling down. In a month or two, it may be a chilling 15C or 20C in the mornings. *Brr!!*

Welcome to this year's Tropical Telegraph! Mr Neung, my designer, and I have decided to give more prominence to photos this year and to try and restrain my seasonal ramblings. A diary of my life from month to month appears on my website ([www.brucehugman.net](http://www.brucehugman.net)) where you can find the detailed stories and hundreds of pictures in the galleries. Here are just some of the highlights of the year and the best photos. (By the way, there have now been more than a quarter of a million visits to the website in its seven and a half years. It's prompted some email reunions with long-lost friends which have been a great delight.)

So a few pages exclusively of captioned photos this year, and rather more limited prose (or less expansive prose, depending on how you see it). *Browse on!*



# The farm



Here's a selection of farm photos from the year, many of which are self-explanatory. There's some of our produce (rambutan, gatom, coconuts, limes); the preparation of the irrigation system; moving one of the ox carts near the house where we could enjoy it; flowers and trees. With the novice monks, engaged in replanting saplings, is Giulia, Queen of Verona, who came with Giampaolo at the beginning of the year. You can see preparations for the pond and water features, and one of the fountains and the waterfall in action. The workers build the gazebo and then it is finished and planted round with shrubs and flowers. The oddity is the police football team: I sponsored their shirts for the local tournament, so they all played with the name of the farm on their backs. The local police Captain had been especially helpful in patrolling the farm and protecting me from any threat of invasion from the family, so I was happy to muck in (I didn't play, of course). Lotus flower in the pond (front page).

## Ban Rai Arun - a small piece of heaven



I am still unsure about the future of the farm, but this year I have invested a lot of time, thought and money in improving it in all kinds of ways. I employed two individual agricultural contractors, and the list of their achievements (and those of the gangs of workers they brought along) is considerable: a gravity irrigation system for the whole farm; a complete clean-up and leaf-sweep; a new, grass-roofed gazebo; a pond with waterfall and four water features in front of the house; all the trees have been individually cultivated and treated with eco-friendly insect repellants, foliar feed and organic fertiliser; one of the ox carts has been rescued and moved in front of the house; steps have been cut up to the old wooden gazebo on the hillside; mature trees have been moved from where they were shaded by other unexpectedly fast-growing specimens; hundreds of new trees and flowers have been planted.

And we've been rewarded: for the first year, there was a serious rambutan harvest and a first, heavy crop of limes; we cut our first coconuts from the eight-year old palms; bananas have flowed home throughout the year; sweet-scented gardenias in several varieties have been flourishing - and in the pond, a multitude of tadpoles within hours of the water arriving.

The ingenuity of these splendid workers also negotiated the bringing of electricity to the farm, so now there is a fridge, light, fans and I can work on my computer for much longer than the life of the battery. Power was needed to pump water from the valley to the irrigation storage tanks at the top of the hill, but it would have been foolish not to have taken it to the house too. Something has been lost, no doubt, but living in such a lovely tropical place without a fridge is not easy for a spoilt boy, and the additional pleasures it offers are considerable. We also now have an automatic pump to provide some pressure to domestic water, so taking a shower is a refreshing indulgence now.





# A Anniversary

**T**oday is 19 October, and it is two years to the day since Chai died. It was also the day on which we had an unexpected court appearance (the superstitious might read something into this); a day on which we seemed to make some progress, too. (I may have news by the time I reach the last page.)

I've been going back over my diary for the years I spent with Chai and the unique riches of some of our experiences and travels together. Why he turned out to be such a destructive, dishonest, malicious bastard I don't think I'll ever understand. The greed and dishonesty appear, sadly, to be family traits.

Chai, of course, was the second of my serious partners who died of AIDS. I thought about Roy when I visited Reims cathedral, where I lit a candle for him - as I do in any evocative and mysterious place, Christian or not; how he just missed out on the medicinal revolution which would have prolonged his life by years, maybe decades. But we did have a great time together. There's much to be thankful for amongst the sadness and loss.

When I was in the UK, I met up with Rob and Vicky who provided the palliative care for Roy in his last months - and the moral and spiritual support which I so much needed. A pair of truly remarkable and gifted people whose wisdom and risk-taking influence me still. I hadn't seen them since I left the UK in 2002. It was a wonderful, boozy, affectionate evening.

## Back with the family

*On my way home from Ghana, I spent a few days in Northamptonshire with my brother and sister-in-law. We had a lovely time, and nephew Andrew and wife Laura came for a couple of days (Laura's expecting the first of the new generation of Hugmans as I write). Here's a typical Sunday lunch (huge, succulent rib of beef and Yorkshire pud); the Hugman men on the Stowe estate; the ancient, but gleaming and pristine Morgan; Jenny fixing up my irreparably broken glasses (here nothing is beyond the house's ingenuity and skills); and a group of lambs we encountered on an afternoon drive - reminding me of the days when a crop of lambs at Hurst Farm was a great event for celebration (and feasting...)*



## Out at last!

*It was a happy Hughman in April when the first copies of the book arrived. It's difficult to tell yet just how well it will do, but I've had the first half-yearly royalty payment (to the end*

*of June) which was for more than 200 copies. Those who've read it and spoken to me say nice things, but I'm awaiting the big break! (Available from [www.pharmpress.com](http://www.pharmpress.com) and Amazon and most internet bookshops around the world.)*

## Twilight years?

**B**y the time of my sixty-fifth birthday in January, I shall have been an expatriate for nearly eight years. At the moment, I think my future, for however many years I have left, is likely to be in Thailand where I continue to feel comfortable and at home. From time to time, I do miss easy access to my English-speaking friends, but my frequent travels and lively email correspondence do largely compensate for that.

My second home in the Swedish countryside (and I am now more at home there than anywhere in the UK) is a joy, and my friendship with Marie and Rafe an essential and sustaining pleasure. The old wooden cottage is a complete and enchanting residence in a lovely rural setting. (If we ever get round to putting in running water and a shower, it will lack nothing.)

I love both places so much that I really hate leaving them - a feeling only endurable because I know I shall be thrilled when I arrive back in one or other of them. But in Sweden, one does have to wear serious clothes (in the winter, heaps of them) and it's always a relief to revert to bare feet, shorts and T-shirts in the tropics.

With the publication of the book, and a number of other useful achievements in various parts of the world recently, I feel as though my powers, such as they are, remain in good shape. I (and my friends) need to keep an eye open for any sign of declining performance and prepare for a gradual, graceful withdrawal from the field of action when I'm no longer on the ball. A year or two yet, I think, but one should be prepared. Twilight? No. Afternoon, yes, but the light is still bright.

## Outsider

**A**t this large distance from Europe and the UK, I'm sad that my view of affairs in the developed world remains cynical and jaundiced, indeed increasingly so. There seems so little commitment to what matters (justice, fairness, opportunity, human fulfilment); so little practical concern about the future of the planet; such financial profligacy and waste of resources, that I wonder if we've learnt anything at all through centuries of civilisation.

Anecdotes fuel this disillusionment: my brother is retiring early from running a respite-care home for children with disabilities because bureaucratic demands and over-regulation are making it impossible to give the children a rich and interesting life; a totally absurd obsession with risk-reduction has made it almost impossible to do anything stimulating, let alone exciting - and the paperwork is just overwhelming. Stories from healthcare and education reinforce this sense of loss of direction (my nephew's wife has been visited by six different midwives in the last trimester of her pregnancy). Industrial unrest; bankers' bonuses unchecked; privatisation of prisons, for god's sake! Crazy and incomprehensible - and that's without a glance at the international scene and the wickedness, violence and injustice all over the world.

My feeling is that civilised values are tentative and fragile, observed and supported when the fundamental human drives of greed, power, self-interest are, for whatever reason, temporarily in abeyance. We are not by nature civilised (or altruistic) beings unless our self-interest is substantially guaranteed; when that security slips, we revert to being beasts. The recent arrest in Yorkshire of two twelve year-olds for assaulting and torturing boys younger than themselves seems to me a glimpse and symbol of that greater bestial undertow: where did such behaviour come from?

## Cheer up!

**W**ell, this is not a very uplifting, festive train of thought. I can't reflect on the year as whole without also remembering many wonderful times which this psychotic world has delivered to me: good friends; lovely places; the privilege of travel in Africa, Europe and Asia; the opportunity to share my knowledge and experience with enthusiastic audiences and to continue learning and expanding my horizons; lots of great books; the challenges of looking after a demanding thirteen year-old; the kindness of many. Life is really great if I do not dwell too much on the big picture.



Here are *Marie and Alex* in Erice (Italy), and *Marie with me* in the Pommery cellars in Reims; the *Queen of Verona* with an elephant in Ruamit village; *Phil with a snake* in Ruamit, at the art stall in the night bazaar, and on a visit to Wat Rong Khun; *Bui with his helicopter* and with *Ui on a boat*; ex-monk *Gumpone* preparing himself for job interviews with my EQUUS book 'When can you start?'; *Rafe* in Sweden with his helicopter; and *Nong Munich* having a treat at Chiang Rai airport. Here's *Jon*, too, met in Sweden - old friend, fellow-tenant in Wappa, designer of my website.



**A**t the beginning of the year, my good friend Gumpone was Pramaha Gumpone, a respected, scholarly monk. It was with him and some of the novices from his temple that we went to Phu Chi Fah and Doi Tung and Ban Rai Arun - where they made such wonderful subjects for photography, as well as being great company. Gumpone left the monkhood to take care of his elderly mother and to develop his studies and become a teacher. He lives not far from my village and we spend a good deal of time together, though less than we did when he was a monk. He often calls in at my house on his way home from the Buddhist university in town where he teaches. We continue to have great fun with our mother tongues and our cross cultural differences. He is one of the few people with whom discussions of such matters are possible - and illuminating.

Mr Katai, who has the lovely small house and plot of land on the banks of the River Gok, just opposite the village where my farm is located, is a kind and generous friend. Amongst other gifts is his frequent driving of me to and from the airport for my many trips. He has an enchanting young nephew who's accompanied us once or twice.



*Khun Paradorn (father) with son Nong Panthukit, wife and daughter, the talented artistic family, who had the stall in the night bazaar selling beautiful, original paintings. Father and son are responsible for the lovely backgrounds in this edition of TT.*

# Friends

Abroad, there have been many renewed friendships and many new ones. In Ghana I got to know a very bright, ambitious young man, Paul, who was working at the conference I attended in Accra, and I spent some time with one of the drummers from the National Dance Company. Ghana really does assault one with the vigour and colour and drama of the culture. It seems to be one of the most stable sub-Saharan countries and the people express a fierce pride in the success of their democracy. While it seems that almost the whole country is deeply Christian (with a significant Muslim minority), one is not pestered, and the general enthusiasm for pleasure is a healthy counterbalance to religiosity.

My dear Mr Bui, who has moved to the periphery of Bangkok for his exacting engineering work, has been largely missing from my life as he rarely gets home and lives too far out of the big city for us to meet when I am passing through. We talk on the phone and email, but I miss him.

When I'm in Bangkok, I usually try to see Pravich, my dear old doctor friend (who has a very tough professional life), and we go out and have splendid and extravagant dinners and look incredulously at our bills more often than not.

The Queen of Verona and her Consort, Steve and Sue, and Phil - a friend from far off Sheffield probation days - have all visited. We have done the rounds of lovely places, temples, elephants, long-tailed boats and restaurants. It's been great. And next year there might just be a few more adventurous souls, including Rafe and Marie, possibly Tony and Maire and Jacob from Sweden (who was my companion in surviving the 2004 tsunami).



## Wet day out

*Song Kran (known to tourists as the water - throwing festival - though it has rather more serious meaning in Buddhist culture) is the time when one fills 50-gallon drums of water and puts them in the back of one's pickup. Friends (here, young Ui and his friend Bat, along with Bui and Katai, who stayed inside the vehicle) pause in town after a couple of hours of drenching everyone in sight. There were water and ice stations all over town where, for a few Baht, one could stop and replenish supplies.*



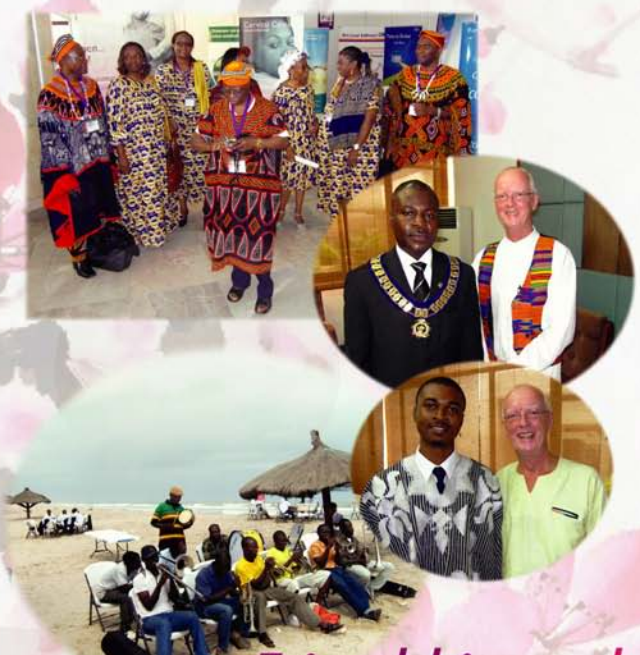
## Young winner

Starting my presentation at the 2009 annual national Chinese conference at which I'm a regular guest, in the interests of setting a light tone, I asked who was the oldest and who the youngest member of our audience; among the rather serious group of academics and professionals, I expected a range of something like 25-80. Much to everyone's delight, the youngest turned out to be this charming 5 year old, attending with his father. He told me his name and age in English and received the prize. The oldest, an 80 year old professor, then proudly made her claim for the other prize. It was a good start to the lecture, warmly applauded. Risk-taking does pay off!



## Bespoke

The lady who does my considerable laundry (and much of Ul's too) and a friend of hers have produced a series of these wonderful shirts for me this year. They also have some customers in Sweden now, since I started showing them off abroad.



## Friendship and music in Ghana

Helping out with a huge international meeting in Accra, I met old friends and made some new ones. Here I am with old friend **President Alex** and with **Paul** (a talented and ambitious young man to keep an eye on); at the **beach party** with a brass band; admiring the **spectacular traditional dress** of Ghana (why would a Ghanaian ever wear a suit?); our wonderful driver, **Richard**, and the **brave despatch-rider** who swept us through the congestion of Accra - and was injured in the process (full story on the website); and, by the pool, **Alphonse**, a drummer from the National Dance Company, which had held us enthralled through an evening's entertainment.







# Sunrise on top of the world

Not the highest mountain in Thailand, but famed for its misty sunrises over Laos, this is a place of pilgrimage for Thais. We spent a chilly night in a guesthouse and then rose at 5am to be taken up to the summit, guided by an enchanting hilltribe boy, **Nong Witun**, who took meticulous care of us, not least ensuring that we didn't fall over the cliff. At the end of the trip, he went off home with his father and three siblings, **all on the one motorbike**. The valleys of Laos are filled with mist and the whole landscape is magical, ethereal in the dawn light.

## Food for the gods...

Here are four of the year's delights: first, snake-head fish in a sauce of lemongrass, lemon and garlic - maybe the most delicious dish I have ever had in Thailand (eaten with my students at Rangsit University one evening); a pot of mussels, prepared for me by Ui's mother (I'm often surprised by kindly home deliveries of good food); and the last two, from the restaurant at the King's project high in the mountains at Doi Angkhan, where almost all the produce is home-grown: a wonderful, slightly spicy, savoury strawberry salad and vegetable tempura.



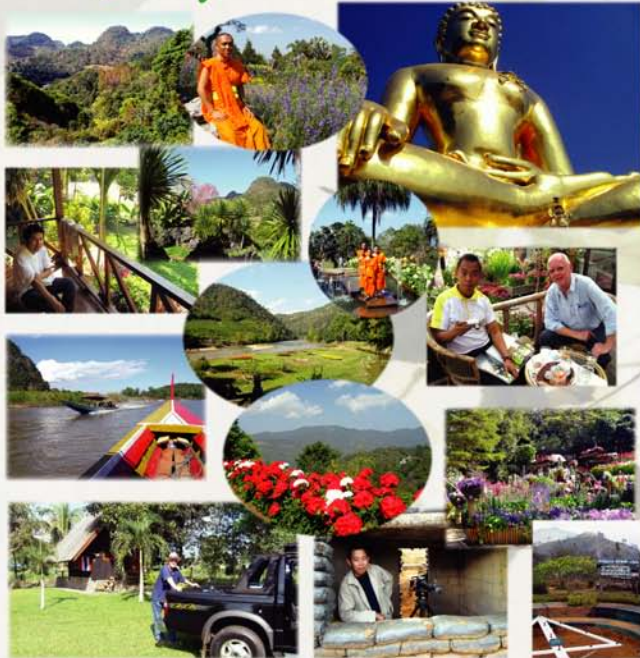
Back in the exotic mountaintop town of Erice, on the south-west tip of Sicily. Stayed with the Velos in **Verona** for a few days (lovely time!); then four days of intense intellectual activity above the clouds and some relaxation in nearby **San Vito lo Capo**. **Hugman** in silhouette from the open terrace of the Insituite; **a typical street**; **sunset** from the restaurant where we dined on our last evening.

## Elevated discussions



## Out, up and about

I'm fortunate that most of my visitors and local friends love taking trips out from Chiang Rai - often on pretty tricky roads to remote, mountainous spots. Here is the lovely mountain landscape of **Doi Angkhan**, nearly two thousand metres, where the purple **Sakura trees** (Japanese flowering cherry) blossom in the cool season; **The Princess Mother's gardens at Doi Tung** never fail to delight at every season, and, on this trip, **Pramaha Gumpone** (as he was then) and some of his **novices** joined us, adding the sunshine of their robes to the scene; there's the **border with Myanmar** (Burma) near Doi Ankhan at the far north western edge of Thailand, and **Katai posing** in one of the bunkers; a view from a restaurant terrace of the **river Gok at Tatorn**, looking towards the Myanmar border. Bui and I spent a couple of nights at **My Dream Guesthouse** on the river Gok, just fifty kilometres from home. Mr **Katai** and I take coffee in our favourite coffee shop in town (coffee grown on the mountains



around Doi Chang which we visit almost every year) and me and my pickup in his lovely garden next to the river, just opposite my farm. **Long-tailed boats** on the river Gok (my favourite means of transport after elephants) and the stunning, enormous **new Buddha image** in the Golden Triangle.



## Happy weeks in Sweden

Three trips this year. Autumnal country walks near our home; shirts blowing in the wind (laundry is quite a novelty for me when in Europe, living, as I do, in full-service Thailand); an unexpected field of sunflowers on the edge of the forest; my ever-delightful Swedish home, and the great oak desk which Sigrid Kahle left for me to work on (with some reminders of my other home on it).



## The youngster in my life

Ui tries to spend as much time as he can at my house where he is indulged - though not unreasonably (there are limits). Here he tackles a large fruit and chocolate 'fondue' at Swensens, and shows off his fighting stag beetle - an annual seasonal pastime which requires touring all the roadside stalls selling the insects to find a champion within the limited budget I give him. He now has my old desktop computer set up in the spare bedroom, where he would spend his entire life chatting to his friends and watching films if I did not draw the line.

## Future professionals

My annual week's teaching communications skills to pharmacy undergraduates continues at Rangsit University. Here is Mr Nay, one of the devoted double-act who provided translations when my English (or my occasional Thai) was incomprehensible and some of the group of students who took me out to dinner one evening. They are considerably less inhibited in the evenings than when in the 240-strong teaching group, but by the end of the week, they had loosened up considerably even in class.



## Upgrading

I've finally taken the plunge and moved on from the combination of my 2002 Toshiba laptop+2003 HP desktop, to a single powerful notebook computer (an HP TouchSmart tX2, for those of you who know about these things). It means I carry my entire digital files, photographs and archives (ten or more years) in one package, though I have, of course, a complete backup stored securely. I risk appearing naïve (to some) when I say how much it has transformed my personal administration and ease of work, though I must admit it is packed with features I doubt if I shall ever get round to exploring.



## House of Hugman

Jenny, my sister-in-law, has a small studio at home where she has been practising the art of calligraphic design for some time now. I commissioned her to do a piece to celebrate 1 September 2009, when Marie took over as Director of the Uppsala Monitoring Centre, and Rafe retired from full-time professional life. This was the lovely result, though I fear the photo will not do it justice.

## Not upgrading

My Ford Ranger pickup (the second one) remains a trusty and robust companion, and the service from the Ford main dealer is first class. There's little to tempt me to spend money on a new vehicle. Life here would be difficult without four wheels, and, often enough, without 4-wheel drive too.



*Morocco in early November was an exciting, first-time trip for me. There was little time for real sight-seeing, but here are a few memories of a rich and colourful culture. The Grand Mosque Hassan II in Casablanca and a display of carpets in the souk; Bab Mansour gate to the enormous old medina of Meknes, one of the narrow streets in the labyrinthine interior, and me at a piece of lovely roadside mosaic; the whole baby lamb served at each table at the Gala Dinner for the meeting, and Alex and me in our souk-bought Moroccan gear.*

## Judicial affairs

The prospects for an early resolution of the damned case against me brought by Chai's family disappeared in a storm of stubborn greed and irrationality in October. Chai's sister rejected even the persistent and patient advice of the judge that her case was weak and that she might well lose at the full hearing in December. The outcome may now be cheaper for Peter and me, but it may take very much longer to reach. There's another hearing on 16 November, too late to be included here. (The full story, episode by episode, appears on my website on the day it happens.)

## Carbon footprint

Extensive and delightful travels this year have done nothing to reduce my contribution to global warming, and three trips in November (Morocco, Cambodia and India) are something of a grand climax to such extravagance. I do love it all, though it would be much less comfortable if I did not have the privileges of my Thai Gold Card - quick check-in, lounges, priority boarding and all that. The most dreaded fate is to travel in the middle seat of three, though this has been happily rare; this last year there have been more empty seats to enhance one's sense of wellbeing.

## Festive season

No plans for Christmas and New Year yet, though Ui was early in asking if I'll buy him a pet hedgehog or a hamster for his present. Rafe and Marie are coming early in the New Year, and we might take a couple of days on a beach, though the sunshine in Chiang Rai is quite good enough for tanning Swedish beauties. I hope other friends will pop in from time to time.

I hope all is well with you and your loved ones. Have an enjoyable holiday season! Keep in touch and get yourselves over here sometime soon!

Warmest greetings and best wishes.

*Bruce*

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