

A Dispatch from Songkhla

By

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Working for a shipping company with a large office in Bangkok, the development of a new project in Songkhla called for my continued presence on location, hence it transpired that I spent a year living in the city. Weekly commuting, although tried initially, was not a viable alternative. My better half was very reluctant about the move at first and not at all happy to leave our house in Bangkok, but she soon came round after I was able to convince her that it was only a temporary deployment for the duration of the project and our return to Bangkok was assured after one year, and that she could fly back to Bangkok on a regular basis to check out our property. So, it was agreed.

At that point in time **Suvanabhumi** airport had not yet opened so **Don Muang** was the only airport serving Bangkok with flights to Songkhla – in fact to Hat Yai, which then required a further one hours drive to Songkhla. The city of Songkhla only had a small airfield operated by the Thai Military, with a Helicopter base which was used to ferry personnel to and from the offshore Oil and Gas fields in the Gulf of Thailand. Songkhla's short runway did not make it compatible for normal commercial jet traffic.

Songkhla is a Sea Port and University Town, by and large, and is the principal administrative city for the southern province of Songkhla, although the neighboring town of Hat Yai is a larger sprawling commercial center. The Port of Songkhla is a major port for the export of frozen seafoods and a support hub for the offshore Oil and Gas Industry as well as being the principal Thai port on the west coast of the Gulf of Thailand. Songkhla is an undeniably historic town endowed with archaeological ruins and cultural heritage and is a multicultural city comprising Thais, Chinese and Malays. The city, with its old China Town and narrow streets, attracts visitors from all over Asia due to its unique charms and traditions.

We arrived in Songkhla on a Friday evening, in December 2004, after our flight had been delayed somewhat and had made a missed approach into Hat Yai Airport. Not the best of omens! Finally, we arrived at the Pavilion Hotel, centrally located in downtown Songkhla, albeit a little dusty and rundown, and in need of renovation to some degree. We lost no time, so Saturday was spent exploring the town and commencing efforts to contact real estate agents to arrange inspections of suitable houses or apartments in which to live.

There is a great street market that is open Sundays which we discovered was conveniently situated in the street right outside the Pavilion Hotel entrance. The market stretched almost the entire length of Platha Road which is closed to traffic on market days; one can buy every conceivable thing at the hundreds of roadside stalls. The market became a regular weekly spot for us whilst living in Songkhla.

My office was located quite close, on the outskirts of the town, in a Soi (lane or small road) which connected to Karnjanavanit Road. Since I was provided with a company car, getting about was simple. Anyway, a car was essential since other means of transport was limited to “tuk tuks”, motorcycles or small cramped taxis which did not operated on a fare meter. Trips in a Taxi were based on a pre-negotiated cost for the journey, but as a foreigner living in Thailand, we always had to pay double the norm as a matter of course. Settling into the job was relatively easy for me with normal office hours 8am to 5pm, Monday to Friday. However, I found it was necessary to work longer hours and sometime on a Saturday morning, which, to be honest I found no great hardship. I would go to work whilst my other half drove to Hat Yai to do the weekly shopping.

My better half had been kept busy, and after about one week of living in the Pavilion Hotel, she found a very nice villa, comfortably furnished with a large garden, located in a nice secluded housing estate only about a 5 minute drive from my office. The village was gated with good security and it butted on to a coconut grove, so it proved ideal; hence we immediately leased for one year and took up occupancy soon after. The house was very spacious and was adorned with large Frangipani and Mango trees in the manicured gardens, and a variety of beautiful colorful flowers and shrubbery skirted the boundary walls.

The scent from the Frangipani trees was wonderful, especially in the early mornings. There was also a garden Pegola with benches and a table, in which were hung many delightful Orchids. It was a wonderful spot in which to relax at the conclusion of the working day. The terms of our lease included a domestic helper and a gardener so all that required our attention was cooking and laundry.

Songkhla, being situated in the southern provinces of Thailand was only about a one hour’s drive from the Thai/Malaysian border. Unfortunately, the southern province of Thailand could be prone to political unrest from time to time and it was only a few months after we arrived in Songkhla that some terrorists from an Islamic separatist group were responsible for bombing the Airport at Hat Yai (on 3rd April 2005), the Carrefour Supermarket and a Hotel, also at Hat Yai. Regrettably, there were fatalities and it made me consider the risks and whether we should remain in the area, but we persisted, and fortunately nothing further happened during our tenure in Songkhla. Although it must be said that security was heightened with roadblocks and spot checks by police, on the main roads, mainly concentrating on the hordes of motor cyclists.

We were there when the Tsunami occurred that wiped out Phuket. The distance between Songkhla and Phuket is not great, only about 150 miles as the crow flies, but Phuket is located on the opposite shore of the Kra Isthmus, facing the Andaman Sea so we did not experience anything as we were well sheltered. In fact, we did not know the Tsunami had occurred until we started to receive phone calls from friends enquiring if we were safe and sound. It was only then we saw the disaster reported on the evening TV News.

Songkhla had its share of expatriates, namely those in business and those that had retired or were living in Thailand on visitor visas. Visitor visas were renewable every three months by a quick trip across the Malaysian border or, by giving passports to a visa or travel agent who would arrange it for a fee, without having to go anywhere. Luckily, I was in Thailand on an employment visa which prevented me from having to go through the rigmarole of frequent visa renewals. Despite what some may think, being a foreign resident employed in Thailand was not all beer and skittles and certainly not any kind of Tax haven, foreigners were subject to 37.5% income tax and received no benefits whatsoever in return. To be honest, it was very much a one-way street, 100% in favor of the Thai Government with no concessions whatsoever for the expatriate.

There was not a great deal of socializing or interaction between expatriate families. Our entertainment usually consisted of a visit to one of the many excellent seafood or Thai restaurants, along the Samila Beach waterfront, of which there were many, or going to the Mermaid Hotel for an evening meal or drink. There was a single Italian restaurant together with a few other European style venues in the city. So, entertainment was it must be said, rather limited. Nevertheless, there were some excellent Thai eateries, especially along Ratchadamnoen Alley. A trip to Hat Yai was necessary if a wider selection of venues was required.

One excellent restaurant that was a favorite of ours was the Amazon Café, quite close to the Songkhla City Park and roundabout. When sitting outside at the Café, it was not uncommon for the monkeys to come down from the surrounding trees and scavenge from diners. They were a nuisance, but the Café staff usually did a good job in chasing them off.

Taking a drive up “Monkey Hill” (Tang Kuan) one was confronted by hundreds of monkeys looking for scraps from passers-by. These primates could be quite vicious and were to a large extent fearless of humans, so caution was always required as they would attack anything that looked to them like food. Taking the cable car up to the summit was worth the ride because of the magnificent vistas that one was able to gain.



Monkey Hill and its residents.

For the single or unattached foreigner or Falang it was another story, there was always the bars on the "Dark Side" which appeared to do a roaring trade. Many of these were girly bars so I leave the rest to your imagination. There were some good spots where one could get a decent European style meal and drink without female interference, the Buzz Stop Bar immediately comes to mind (Irish theme pub) in this category. There were several others that retained an air of respectability such as The Victory Bar, Office Bar, Corner Bar and Oscars Bar. These were popular venues and crowded most nights. Also, along the Samila Beach strip, there were numerous bars that offered an exciting night life for those seeking such entertainment, made conspicuous by their array of colored Christmas lights displayed outside their respective premises.

Every Saturday we would drive to Hat Yai in order to do shopping at Carrefour Supermarket and shopping mall. We never stayed longer than necessary in view of earlier attack by separatist terrorists. There were reasonable grocery shops and a good bakery in Songkhla, but they lacked the scope and variety of imported European foodstuffs, catering manily for locals. It was not until several years after we had returned to Bangkok that a Tesco Lotus Supermarket was opened in Songkhla. I remember that we had to time our shopping because the sale of alcohol was restricted and only permitted between certain trading hours, due to local regulations, and it was only the Supermarket in Hat Yai that carried decent stocks of spirits and wines.

Sundays were pretty standard, a drive to the beach followed by a long walk, brunch at one of the hotels then in the afternoon a visit to the street market close to the Pavilion Hotel in the city center. There was always something new to see at the market. Sunday evenings would likely be a trip to one of the beachfront seafood restaraunts , or if feeling really energetic a drive to the seafood eateries at Ko Yo, where there was a wide selection of good waterside seafood restaurants, that overlooked the Songkhla Lake. I perhaps would have a quick early morning round of Golf on a Saturday but I found the Umbrella Girls spent most of their time chasing away snakes from the greens and fairways, so that quelled my interest somewhat. That was about the scope of of our average weekend activities.

There was the odd occasion, if work was relatively slow, when we would go to Trang or Koh Samui for a long weeked, to break the monotony of Songkhla. Both venues were quite close, within easy reach and served by airlines. Singapore was the most popular venue for a weekend stay, it was much quicker to fly to Singapore than it was to Bangkok, with several daily flights being available from which to select.

About every six weeks my wife would take an overnight trip to Bangkok to check on our home. It was good because she would catch the no frills "One to Go" flight from Hat Yai at 11am, arrive in Don Muang around 12.15, then return the following day, arriving back in Songkhla at around 5pm. At least it gave us piece of mind, even though our house in Bangkok was in a gated and secure compound, but that did not account for everything. Timely payment of electricity,

water and other utility bills was important because if not settled on time the hassle of late payment was a nightmare, with all the beaucratic red tape. Frequent running of airconditioning and proper ventilation throughout the house was also essential in order to avoid mildew and damage to contents because of the high humidity that prevailed.



Bangkok to Hat Yai by “One Two Go” domestic Airlines. Before “Thai Smile” Airways took over the route and “One Two Go” was rebranded “Orient Thai Airways” in 2006. The Airline finally ceased all operations in 2018.



Map of southern provinces of Thailand, indicating location of Songkhla and Hat Yai. The bold black line depicts the Malaysian Border.

Trang, a popular tourist center lies on the western side of the isthmus facing the Andaman Sea.



A Thai Flag coastal tanker high and dry on Samila Beach after a squall of strong winds and rough weather. It was not uncommon for ships to drag anchor due to the poor holding ground at the anchorage, which is not far offshore. A much safer practice is to weigh anchor and slow steam around during such conditions, rather than remain at the anchorage,

returning to anchor once weather conditions have settled.



Left, the famous mermaid statue at Samila Beach. It is a great tourist attraction and a must see for visitors to Songlha for photographic purposes. Called the “Golden Mermaid”, or Nang Nguek Thong, it is intended to promote Samila Beach as a tourist attraction and serves no other purpose,

although there are those who look upon it as a kind of shrine and often adorn it with garlands. The Cat and Mouse Islands (sometimes called Cat and Rat Islands) can be seen in the background.



Left, the white sandy Samila Beach at Songkhla. Samila Beach faces the small Cat and Mouse Islands, so named as their topography resembles a cat chasing a mouse. The headland of Samila features a “Golden Mermaid”. To the south is a 9-hole golf course and soccer stadium, and numerous beachside seafood restaurants and bars.

The port at Songkhla has two main areas. The offshore base is a little upstream and would easily become congested. It was close to the Thai Navy jetties and the old fishing port area. PTTEP (PTT Exploration and Production Public Company Limited – the Government owned O&G exploration conglomerate) was in the process of building a new offshore hub, closer to the international port, which became operational in 2005. This was an improvement because the old base was a little upstream in amongst various fishing stakes, and the ships were always receiving claims from the traditional fishing stake owners for alleged damage, many of these claims were fabricated and just a means of extracting revenue from foreign operators of the ships.

In 2005 Songkhla increased its activity and boomed as an important hub for shipping serving the various O&G (oil and gas) installations and floating export terminals in the Gulf of Thailand. As part of the increased volume of offshore related shipping, an upgraded helicopter depot for passenger services became operational at the old Songkhla Military airfield. Numerous shuttle flights were conducted daily between Songkhla and the offshore platforms and installations, ferrying oil field personnel.



Typical Chopper servicing Offshore installations from Songkhla Heli-base.



City scape of the sprawling town of Songkhla.



A Drone's view of the Songkhla Offshore O&G Base. Fully operational as of 2006. The old base at the Fishing Port Jetty area was been disbanded and no longer used, except for vessels undergoing repair and survey, etc. The new facility was built by PTTEP to accommodate offshore ships under their charter. The coastal tanker jetty, used extensively to supply fuel for the Gulf of Thailand O&G fields, is located just out of picture at bottom right.



Songkhla Main Jetty Complex for container and commercial vessels. It is unusual to see vacant berths as the port is generally busy with a high rate of wharf occupancy. It is the largest sea food export facility in South East Asia.

The commercial Port of Songkhla is the most important in southern Thailand as it serves all the import and export needs of the southern provinces of the country, hence it is operated as a separate entity to the Offshore Supply Base.

The quickest way to reach the Port(s) was to use the Songkhla Lake vehicular ferry service which operated from the Royal Thai Navy Base area. Once having crossed the narrow waterway it was then a short drive to the main Port area. This was a reliable and cheap service to use and very convenient.

Realistically, living in Songkhla was a memorable experience, although if not the most exciting at times. Nevertheless, we shall remember the time spent residing and working in the city with some affection, especially because of its friendly people.

At the conclusion of our one year in Songkhla, as planned I was re-deployed back to head office in Bangkok. We decided that it would be a good experience to drive back to Bangkok. This was a huge mistake as we found the roads, by and large, to be poor and crowded with trucks and heavy traffic. Despite only a few stops for coffee and petrol the trip took us more than 12 hours and was something we vowed never to repeat. Progress was slow, due mainly due to the high volume of trucks and many buses which were slow (mainly because of the poor roads) with very few places where one could safely overtake. Eventually we arrived home in Bangkok at 10pm, ready for a strong libation and hot shower.



Buddhist Shrine on the corner of Platha Road and Ratchadamnoen Alley in central Songkhla. Magnificently ornate and intricate, the Temple is beautifully maintained in a picturesque and tranquil setting.

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Note:

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