

# Elephant Camp

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I am a control freak. Just ask my students and colleagues. My unit tests and worksheets are filed immaculately; my emails are answered immediately; I always have a fresh overhead marker and my students know better than to claim that I was the one who misplaced their homework. This need to control everything has taken over my life. I wake up in the middle of the night worrying about meetings and spend hours after school straightening up before I can leave. I wish I could relax more, but being out of control makes me very nervous.

So you can imagine my reaction when I found myself standing in the mud in the middle of the jungle wearing one shoe and an oversized t-shirt screaming my frustration at a pack of dogs who had stolen my only other shoe. I had left those shoes outside my hut the night before and then woke up to a dog fight and a shoe crisis. My fellow travelers stood in the doorway laughing at me as I hopped around and cursed. Somehow this was not how I pictured my summer when I found out I had won a Fulbright Hays scholarship to study in Thailand and Vietnam. I had visions of exotic food and ancient temples. Of course being the control freak, I made lists, did research, and tried to plan for every possibility. What I discovered was the best parts of my journey were the things I couldn't predict. I had to give up command, rely on other people, and relax.

One morning, I stood in the streets of Chiang Rai at dawn to offer food to the monks. The orange clad men, some merely boys, walked single file out of the wat, holding a metal bowl. The food they collect that morning will be the only food they eat that day. If no one donates food, then the monk will not eat. We stood at a bus stop with palm leaves wrapped around sticky rice, a group of farang teachers obviously out of place among the businessmen, mothers, and children standing on the side of the road. When a monk came by, I stepped forward and placed the packet of food in the bowl, being careful not to touch the monk or the bowl. Then the monk chanted a blessing over me, as I awkwardly knelt on the pavement, before continuing his collection round. When I had given away all of my food, I watched the people from all walks of life lined up on the street to donate food, amazed that this happened every morning. Generosity as a way of life is a sight to see.

Education as a cultural value is another. I was lucky enough to be part of the Art Guru Offering at Chiang Mai University. This ceremony to pay respect to one's teachers is celebrated all over Thailand. Students return to their colleges or high schools to celebrate this in an event that I can only compare to my high school's homecoming. The ceremony is complete with parades, music, dancing, and costumes. The freshmen of the university elect a Nangkaew (queen) who gathers water to take to the teachers as part of the ancient ceremony. This represents the cleansing of the heart and body of the students. After many blessings and ceremonial processions, the freshmen line up to swear allegiance, to endure hardship, and to persevere in their education. The teachers then agree to transfer skills and knowledge to these students. This agreement is symbolized by a bracelet that the teacher ties on the wrist of each student. I couldn't help wonder how different my classes would be if we

started our year with such an event.

One of the top moments for me was at the Thai elephant conservation center. The center is a kind of pachyderm paradise in Lampang, a province in northern Thailand. The center houses 45 elephants and works to help the elephants of Southeast Asia who have been suffering due

to the logging industry and industrialization. My first morning there, I stood at the edge of the path and watched the elephants come to meet us. Sixteen teachers from all over the United States and four Thai guides stood in awe as these magical creatures appeared out of the mist. The morning was silent except for the soft commands of the mahouts. I squirmed with excitement. I was about to ride my first elephant. I climbed into the wooden saddle on the back of my beast and placed my feet on the elephant's neck. Then we began to move. The other elephants trekked down the mountain one behind the other. My elephant didn't follow the pack or pay much attention to his mahout's instructions. Being more independently minded, he charged off the path and up the hill to eat leaves in the jungle then ran back down straight into the river where he began to exuberantly splash around in the water. I held on tightly as my young mahout scolded his charge and tried to get the elephant back on track. It was out of my hands, so I just enjoyed the ride.

Vietnam really pushed me out of my comfort zone. In Hanoi there are no traffic lights. Cars just beep and merge. Crossing the street as a pedestrian is an adventure not taken by the faint of heart. I was told to just step out into traffic and keep moving because if you run or stop, you will be hit. The first time I stood at the edge of a major intersection as motorcycles and cars zoomed by me, I realized that I wasn't in control here. I could either try to cross and hope for the best, or I could spend the day at the hotel. So, I took a deep breath and stepped out in front of traffic. Cars swerved around me and bikes honked and brushed my clothes. I just kept going, adrenaline racing. By the time I got across, my entire body was shaking, but I had made it. By the end of my stay there, I just walked out into traffic without batting an eye.

Every day was a different adventure. I took a boat ride on Halong River, ate fresh fish, and bought fruit from a small woman in a rowboat filled with produce floating out in the middle of the bay. By the time we got to the shore, the dock was so crowded that our boat couldn't get near it. We were told to exit to another boat. I hopped on the boat next to us and made my way along the side and jumped down to another one. Groups from other boats were doing the same thing and we climbed over each other and tried not to fall into the bay. I must have crossed fifteen boats before I caught a glimpse of the dock. By the time I got to shore,



*Diane Curry in Thailand*

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I was out of breath from laughing so hard. Who knew disorder could be so much fun?

I was feeling very proud of how relaxed and laid back I was becoming when we went to visit a temple in Chiang Mai. I silently walked past a line of gold Buddhas, all in different poses. Each Buddha represented a day of the week and was the special Buddha of those born on that day. I asked our guide if the poses signified anything. She told me these were the birthday Buddhas of those born on that day. You were supposed to embody the traits of your Buddha. “Oh, let’s look up mine,” I said excitedly.

Would my Buddha embody love, generosity or perhaps be a good listener?

“You have the Sunday Buddha,” she said. “That is a very special Buddha. He is over there-standing with his hands folded down in front of him.”

“What does that mean?” I asked.

“He is a very good manager.” She was smiling. “He likes to make sure, how do you say, everything is being done correctly. He watches out for everyone. He organizes and fixes.” I looked at my Buddha and sighed. He was a control freak too.