

The Great, the Good, the Bad and the Ugly about Thida by Levi Shand

Here I set forth some highlights and lowlights about working at Old Thida and New Thida, contrasted against experiences I've had working at other institutions.

Old Thida – the Great

For me, the best part of working at Old Thida was its easygoing atmosphere. Looking around, it always felt to me that it shouldn't be so chill: it's a classic school complex that hosts thousands of students daily, all in accord with this or that teacher's priorities for them. There's a lot of movement and there can be a lot of noise, but somehow the stress which I imagine fits with a situation like that doesn't exist. Sure, stress levels are subjective, but the would-be sources of stress (bosses, teachers, unruly students) seem to me to produce so few external pressures that I look back and very, very impressed with the school culture at Old Thida. It's school the way you imagined school as a young kid: purposed toward education, busy with interpersonal relationships, and well-spiced with life-preserving humor and lightheartedness.



Old Thida – the Good

School lunch is pretty good. Sadly I personally never warmed, so to speak, to Thai-style spicy food. Everyday Thida school lunch consists of:

- white rice

- a noodle dish (maybe)
- pork, chicken or fish (done Thai-style)
- a soup

Dishes I've seen come down the pike, if you're familiar with some of their Thai names:

- pad ka prao
- khanom jeen
- gang keao wan
- massaman curry
- salty fish
- guay teao
- fried chicken/fried pork
- fish cakes
- tam kha
- tam yam
- gang sam

Here I'll claim that Thida is lunch is only good because on most days it is good. To qualify that: on some days, I find it inedible. Some days I eat rice and maybe purchase something from the canteen to supplement. Thida serves *real* Thai food, so all of my American notions of what Thai food is have been colored by working there.

Old Thida – the Bad

Normally, I'd champion holidays as great, fun times where no one works and everyone enjoys a little time with their friends and family. However, in Thailand schools like to have kids "practice" for upcoming holidays. Usually the school holds celebrations or events on holidays, and the children do things like march or dance, or put on a show for parents. In order for the kids to offer up the best product they can, their teachers have them practice during school hours, down in one courtyard or another. Too often, that courtyard is just outside the class you're trying to teach and the echoes – of instruction given, of whistles, instruments, singing voices, chants, whatever – bounce up the walls and into your classroom, even if the sliding doors are closed.

I have developed a sort of drill sergeant's voice in trying to compete with that noise. When I first started teaching at Thida I couldn't hear myself some days, barking a lesson at the top of my lungs. I'd go home hoarse and frustrated. Still happens sometimes, but I've adapted.

Old Thida – the Ugly

Rainy season might be the ugliest part (taken literally) about the “being a foreign teacher” bit. There are days here in Surat where you wake up resistant to getting out of bed because it’s raining and has been all night, and the rain doesn’t stop until sometime the following night. That means that the drive to school soaks you, and the drive home is just as kind. Teaching soaking wet in air-conditioning is awkward and uncomfortable but pitiable, so your students and teachers maybe will laugh at you looking like a wet dog but will also understand (as it’s happened to them countless times).

After having dried off sometime during third period or during lunch (your socks never really dry out),



you teach for another few periods and then it’s back on the motorbike for the ride home. At that point it doesn’t really matter if it’s downpour-ing or dripping a little; you’re still getting wet against your will for the second time in a day and it feels like a final kick in the shin. No! Wait! The *final* kick in the shin comes if you don’t have a water heater, and the answer to a long day of getting rained on is a cold shower. POW! Take that, teacher.

New Thida – the Great

I haven’t encountered anything on the Internet or in the world in general that approaches the heights of cuteness on display every day at New Thida. It’s amazing what effect that has on you: if you’ve had the crappiest day and there’s no sign of it getting better, a walk around the school can work your knitted brows right out and your pursed lips into a smile. For me it’s walking by the Anubans’ (kindergarteners’) classrooms midday and seeing them all passed out in rows like little piglets in

their blankets, taking their nap. The teacher’s there presiding over the silent congregation and nibbling at her lunch, looking a little bored. That image for me is the antidote for a grim attitude.

Otherwise, tiny people are accosting you all day long amid calls of “Teacher! Teacher!” and all that love and admiration seeps straight through your carapace. That doesn’t happen at many jobs, and it does feel good to be so openly appreciated.

New Thida - the Good

My experience at New Thida has been enhanced by the regular delivery of Thai snacks by various Thai teachers to me – to my person, to my desk. Snacks come at all times of day and their form is varied. They may be roasted sticky rice snacks wrapped in tidy banana leaves, or they may simply be fruit – exotic fruit – or *khanom chan*, coconut jelly sweets.

This custom of gift-giving is distinctly Thai. Each little snack delivered ought to be considered as a thought thrown your way, i.e. someone was thinking about you and decided to show that they were

thinking about you. That's really, really sweet and when you reciprocate the gesture, you are received very warmly.

Receiving sugary fruits – rambutans, mangosteens, mangoes, longans, lychees, apple slices, or bananas, to name a few – is qualified by the odd durian or jackfruit pieces that sometimes float your way. Now, I know some folks *like* durian, and they *like* jackfruit, but I must apologetically remain outside their ranks. The stuff smells terrible and isn't so bad once you're 70% into a piece, but eating either of those two isn't something I'm interested in repeating.

Also, the coconut jelly sweets haven't really made it out of SE Asia for a reason. I'll let you consider that one.

New Thida – the Bad

The New Thida building is quite modern. Its circular architecture is unique in Surat Thani, it's got printing facilities, an industrious kitchen, and a stylish computer room – not bad! Bathrooms, however...how could the planners omit something so obvious? Okay, so bathrooms aren't totally absent, but access to them is made quite awkward by their placement on the balconies outside each classroom.

Imagine 110 or so little kids sharing a boy's and a girl's restroom setup all day, as often as they please. Tell me how that image smells. Now imagine having to use the restroom and making a circuit of "your" classrooms (because wouldn't be a bit weird to pass through a strange classroom just to use its restroom?) to whether one is empty so that you can use the same toilet your fifty-five kids use...not pretty, is it? There *is* a teachers' restroom, luckily. Unluckily, it's on the fourth floor (the top floor) and it lacks toilet paper (as if you could flush that anyway), towels, paper towels, soap, a trash can...all the things you might expect in a restroom, save toilets – it has those.

New Thida – the Ugly

While the "ugly" at Old Thida has more to do with you, the ugly-looking teacher, the "ugly" at New Thida is more about the kids. Wait, you may be thinking – I said the kids were really cute, just a little while ago. They are, but there's something *dentally* amiss with them that either ruins their cuteness or amplifies it further, depending on your point of view.

I can't help but to have noticed that many parents across the socio-economic spectrum in Thailand permit (condone?) the neglect of their children's baby teeth. The prevailing logic here says that those teeth are going to fall out anyway, so why bother brushing them? The results play out in many smiling mouths: blackened teeth, rotted to points in some severe cases. One is reminded of the oral disease graphics dentists post in their offices to encourage regular dental care. Not all of the children suffer the effects of this ruinous line of thinking, but enough of them do that a foreign teacher can become desensitized to the sight.

Well, that's the gamut of positives and negatives. There are many others, as many as there are teachers to witness and experience them, but here's hoping that these few opinions help the image of these schools to form in your head.