

A First Year Teacher's Journal by Tristan Rentos

VIP Vs General Admission

By Tristan Rentos

23 April 2009

A lot of you out there have been to Thailand for what I can only assume was one of the best experiences of your life. How could it not be – this place is the total package, with the world's best beaches, plenty of restaurants and clubs, exotic tours to jungles, temples and marine parks, with the end result being not too damaging to your bank account.

This, however, is only one very small part of Thailand.

Think of Thailand like a high profile Hollywood nightclub, the sort you see on "Entourage". There is the roped off, special service VIP section, which is the part I described before. In Patong beach, Koh Samui, Haad Rin Beach, Phi Phi, central Bangkok and Chiang Mai everyone speaks some English, there are several upmarket hotels, western food restaurants, tours to all the popular spots – in short, these places are set up as a beach/jungle paradise 'home away from home' for cashed up westerners looking for some time out.

The 'general admission' section of Thailand is every part of the country which is not constantly frequented by tourists. Surat Thani falls into this section. As the Lonely Planet guide has basically written this place off as nothing more than an embarking point to get to Koh Samui, Surat does not get many tourists. There is no VIP service here. As I write this on the morning of just my third day here, I have found only one person besides Peter who speaks English (I am currently the only SE teacher in town, everyone else is on leave). I have not been asked if I wanted a tuk tuk, drugs, female entertainment, tour package or anything else that those in Phuket are currently being propositioned with every 10 yards down the main street. Not once. And I have been doing a lot of walking. In my neighbourhood, there are no tour guides, no Indian tailors and no strip clubs.

Wen (SE Assistant Manager) has been over a couple of times to check up on me, but for the most part I am on my own. Being the only westerner around has been a character building experience, one which I would not swap for anything. To get fed, I have to hang in the chow line like everyone else. Most restaurants here, especially the breakfast and lunch joints don't have menus. The waiters don't speak any English. So, you have the choice of learning a few Thai phrases and enjoying the best food you'll get anywhere, or going hungry. Being tall, slim and pale I tend to stand out on the street, however I feel that Thai people in Surat view westerners as more of an enigma than a cash cow.

If you are reading this from the viewpoint of a prospective SE teacher, think of my experience not as a warning or something negative, but as an opportunity to experience this wonderful country without a set of blinders on. At Super English, help is always there if you need it – you'll never walk alone. However, at the end of the day I'd much rather be in the Surat chow line than eating at the Novotel Siam Square - without a shadow of a doubt.

About Me

I am an Australian citizen, originally from country Victoria. I lived in Melbourne for 18 years before leaving for Surat. My 9 to 5 job was in Conference & Exhibition management, I also did a bit of freelance Public Relations work when needed. I worked in hospitality for almost 10 years, both back and front of house, and in my limited spare time I enjoyed hiking, camping and driving my Honda Civic. In my travels I have previously been to Thailand twice (the VIP section only), Vietnam, Cambodia, Nepal and Fiji.

Fortune favours the brave

By Tristan Rentos

04 May 2009

What exactly causes culture shock? Peter has mentioned this condition quite extensively on the SE website, one which affects different people in different ways. If you do suffer from culture shock, does this make you a naturally introverted person, or are you simply homesick and expressing this by closing your mind and rejecting all that is different?

In my first two weeks here, I have come to understand a great many things, both about Thailand and the limitations of my previous time here as a tourist. In my previous article, I described the difficulty in doing simple things in my first three days, such as getting a bite to eat due to the language barrier. With a lot of patience, a positive attitude and a little help from my friends I feel that any possibility of culture shock has been well and truly exorcised.

A good example of this occurred last week. I rode my new bike, aka 'The Dolly Sprint' (it's a Triumph) to Sahathai Shopping Centre to buy a yellow shirt to wear to school on Mondays. I then decided to find Super English to get my bearings. Upon arrival, Wen recommended that I get some lunch in the local area, and I stumbled across a noodle shop next to Milano's Pizzeria that I had never been to before. For the first time since I got here, I ordered my food in Thai, understood everything that was asked of me, and got exactly what I ordered. I even gave the correct money to the cashier when told the price.

This basic conversational process may seem like an every day thing to those who have been here for 6 months plus, but for us newbies, getting this essential element of your day to the point where you can move around town and eat anywhere is a huge achievement – believe me. After clearing this huge hurdle, I now see learning Thai not as a linguistically daunting minefield filled with difficult tones and inflections, but as an opportunity to build my vocabulary and get more out of my time here than I otherwise would.

I am still going to make many mistakes when speaking Thai, and some of the locals will laugh at me when I mispronounce a word (one word can have several different meanings dependant on the tone). But I don't care. At the end of the day, fortune favours the brave, and I have found the only way to learn this remarkable language is to take the plunge, put a smile on your face and learn the hard way. Guidebooks can only take you so far, the rest is up to you.

When writing this entry, I was somewhat conscious of the fact that as a tourist I only spent two weeks at a time in Thailand (I've been here twice before). I have now reached this 'line in the sand' and I feel that while many of my fellow Australians are making their way back after their extended Easter break, this is only the beginning of my time here. I look forward to each day, and certainly each venture to a new restaurant with renewed optimism as I start to consider Surat as my new home.

Eastern Mysteries
By Tristan Rentos
18 May 2009

As a newcomer to Thailand, observing Thai people is a polarising experience, leaving you with many confusing thoughts and questions. Thais are often immaculately dressed, yet the streets and surroundings are often overrun with rubbish and stray dogs. Women powder their faces to appear more pale and 'pure', yet spend all their time outdoors in the sun. I have noticed many Thai people try to exude the impression of wealth and hubris, yet according to GDP per capita figures, the vast majority of the population would struggle to make the same money as even the most downtrodden young western backpacker. Women dress like classic Stepford wives yet drive around on a beaten up Honda moped.

I believe that the answer to these juxtapositions displayed by Thai people lies rooted in their culture, of which I am still learning new aspects of every day. There is also the possibility that the conservative nature of Surat Thani (real Thailand) dictates etiquette which is very different to places like Phuket and Haad Rin beach (tourist Thailand).

Saving face and honour is extremely important to a Thai person. I have never seen anything resembling a verbal or physical disagreement between two Thai people. I find myself saying "Mai Phen Rai" (meaning no worries or nevermind) more than hello and thank you when out and about in public. Thailand time (it will be done when I get around to it) is almost as official as the time shown on the clock!

Living and working in Surat is not and will never be the same as holidaying in Phuket. If you enjoy that sort of lifestyle, you may be disappointed in Surat proper, as while there are some great pubs/bars and discos around town, they are nowhere near the beach, the women have their clothes firmly on and the venues themselves are scattered all around town, so forget about club hopping.

Nobody is saying that you can't go out for a few drinks and have a good time, it's just that Surat has a conscience, a brake, a point that you can't cross. This conscience doesn't exist at places like the monthly full moon party on Haad Rin beach, and many western tourists have that impression of Thailand as a whole – that anything goes. SE teachers often party together, and have a great time, but we never forget what the main reason we're in Surat is – we're here to be teachers.

Smile like you mean it
By Tristan Rentos
25 May 2009

Much like a child looking forward to his or her first Christmas, the anticipation of getting in front of a group of students to 'strut my stuff' was palpable! I have been teaching now for one week, which didn't go something like this; it went exactly like this:

As you would expect, training went before teaching. The first day was with Peter; after a delicious Chinese breakfast Lize (my fellow newbie) and I were whisked away to SE to learn how to become Super Teachers. Peter conducted this session like an open forum, first answering any questions we had and then introduced the main teaching methods which make SE stand apart from other schools.

The next day was spent with Victoria and Dylan, who took us through the do's and don'ts of teaching at Thidamaepra. Thida is one of the Thai schools that SE subcontracts to, it is mentioned on the website. To be honest, I wasn't worried about Thida, as public presentations have never been a problem for me and that as long as my lesson plans were smart I was capable of delivering to 45 kids for one hour at a time – more on this later.

The rest of the training was spent with Victoria and Dylan, who wisely made sure that our lesson plans were on the right track. The night before I started teaching, I checked over my plan, and made sure I got a good nights' sleep.

My First Day at Thida

My first day of teaching was almost surreal, a day I will never forget. My game plan was simple: Bring out the jovial Steve Irwin (the Crocodile Hunter) accent, smile like I meant it and take it slow. Everything went really well, as well as a first day could. I teach three classes of grade 3 students from 8.15 to 11.30, 45 students per class. The kids were really nervous, but they started to open up as the lesson went on. I had really simple review targets which the kids met with ease. I felt that they could see I had their best interests at heart; that I had a strong command of the English language and I was an easy going fellow that liked to have a good time at school.

One week later

After one week, I have got into my groove and I feel that I have been doing this for a lot longer than one week. The kids all give me high fives and shake 'n' bakes before and after class, I get presents and pictures drawn for me. I have been putting a lot of effort into my lesson plans and the students are responding and learning my key messages. I genuinely enjoy getting up in the morning to go and teach these kids – sure you get some minor behavioural problems, but they are insignificant compared to the smiles and laughter that make my morning all the better. The best compliment I have received so far was from the Thai teacher who assists me with one of my classes. She told me that I was a very good teacher and the students are taking in what I am teaching. You can't get much better than that after only one week!

My first day at Super English

My first day at Super English was a free class day, where current and prospective students could come and trial the programme. Unfortunately it was raining buckets so attendance was somewhat low and none of my students attended. I did get to observe Peter and Victoria during their lessons, which was good for ideas and lesson structure.

One week later

I have been assigned one class at Super English, a SE level 7 group with 15 students. Thus far, this has been a challenging assignment for me, for several reasons. Firstly, there is a huge age gap between the students, as the younger ones are 8-9 years old whereas the older students are 16. Secondly, the level of English comprehension ranges from lower intermediate to lower advanced. Thirdly, with such a large class by SE standards I feel that I can't give everyone the level of attention that I would like to, especially when there are several very clever students who come to SE with the right attitude.

I need to plan my lessons very carefully with this group, as I have to keep it relevant and interesting for the older students, but entertaining for the younger group to keep their attention. The students and I still have a great time (hangman has become 'our game'), but I am still working out the best way to approach this challenge. I am very confident that I will find a way, as I love the kids and would not swap them for any other class in Surat.

Final Thoughts

I really enjoy my job and my life so far in Thailand. I hope that this isn't beginner's luck, and that I can continue to make learning English an enjoyable experience for these kids. I will let you know in the coming weeks how I go with my Super English class – as the old saying goes, where there's a will, there's a way.

Not all who wander are lost
By Tristan Rentos
08 June 2009

A wise man once told me that there's nothing in life that can't wait one minute. After teaching in Surat for a month, I now know exactly what he meant.

For those who are reading this as a prospective Super English teacher, let me lay it out for you as I see it: Teaching in Surat is an incredibly rich experience that will allow you to see your own life in a new perspective. It will also build character, as I realised early on that if I did lose my patience I have failed in my position as a positive role model to these kids. Your students, regardless of their age, will challenge you constantly in one way or another (often in good ways that make you a better teacher) every single time you stand in front of them. It is up to you as to how to respond.

At Thida, my Pratom (grade) 3 classes are getting better with each passing week. Some concepts, such as countable vs. non-countable nouns were difficult for the kids to grasp, and I had to take my time and approach the task in several different ways. The students might all be the same age, but they are at different levels. For example, there are several Super English students in my Pratom 3/7 class and they are all way ahead of the curve. They finish their writing faster than all the other students and their pronunciation and sentence structure is a lot more advanced. Having such different levels in the class has been challenging, but ultimately it has proven to be helpful. After going through the Super English orientation and training, I know how to use these level splits to my advantage.

Over at Super English, my very large Super Level 7 class has now been split in half. I have taken the more advanced kids; David (another new teacher) has stepped up to take the younger students. Having the more advanced students has been great – they are all very well behaved, keen to learn and have fun (not one or the other). I can also do difficult concepts with them that would not be possible with the younger kids still in the class. For example, two weeks ago I did past, present, and future tense verbs (a very difficult concept for Thai people as the Thai language does not have verb tenses). When planning for this lesson, I often had to remind myself that despite these kids being aged 12 to 16, they are still learners and I have to take it slow and easy – except when we play hangman because I always lose!

On a personal level, I have received several emails from home asking me how I have settled in and do I miss home (Melbourne, Australia). If I'm honest, despite Australia being one of the best places in the world to call home, I don't miss it at all. This could be because I have only been here for seven weeks, or most likely because Thailand is such a beautiful place that it's almost intoxicating (even without the Leo beer!). Let me put it this way: I don't miss what I've left behind, but I do miss the people I've left behind - nothing an eight hour plane trip can't fix!

Teaching and living in Thailand is a really good fit for me. I am truly comfortable in Surat, and very pleased to call this place home. As another wise man once said, I love it when a plan comes together!

Letting your lives collide
By Tristan Rentos
21 June 2009

Back at University, I remember discussing with my friends one of the few pieces of advice that is taught to each business student: don't let the events or the people in your working life affect your personal life, and visa versa – in other words, don't let your lives collide. This is frowned upon in the western corporate environment because each carbon copy HR or sector manager is taught that each employee must be fresh and unburdened every morning and any "baggage" that comes in the door will stay in the office.

At Super English, following the aforementioned corporate etiquette mantra will making your Thailand experience a complete misery. SE teachers are more than just colleagues; I would almost go so far to say that we are almost reliant on each other to a point, both in and out of the workplace. From the simple things that make up your day such as trading sweets, music and movies and telling you what medicine to get for common problems, to bigger favours such as borrowing motorbikes and getting advice about teaching, we are all here to help.

SE teachers are also a brilliant resource to learn Thai. As I have mentioned in previous entries, this language is really hard (even our Thai neighbour admits this) and any help you can get could make the difference between a smooth conversation and scrambling to find the phrase in your dictionary because you messed up the pronunciation and the Thai person you are trying to talk to is looking at you like you are an idiot (this has happened to all of us). None of us can speak anything resembling fluent Thai, but you don't need to – I have found that you do need the following basics down to make your life in Surat a lot easier:

1. General greetings and pleasantries
2. Ordering food and drinks (buying things in general)
3. Money and numbers (this is crucial)
4. Giving tuk tuk drivers directions
5. Buying tickets for Khanon and other weekend getaway destinations
6. Telling street touts that hang out opposite Talad Kaset 2 Bus Station that you are not a tourist and to please stop hassling you

For new teachers, finding your way around the maze of Surat Thani backstreets can only be done with one of the older teachers as a guide. Now I have been in Surat for two months, I know where all the best restaurants and street carts are and where to get a particular dish from. Saving money on food is one of the best tricks in Surat because you don't need to spend big bucks to get a great meal here.

Making the decision to come to Thailand is hard for a lot of people as it involves leaving your family and friends behind. The good news is you will gain a new family of Super English teachers the minute you touch down at Surat Airport.

Calling a spade a spade
By Tristan Rentos
05 July 2009

The past two weeks have been a whirlwind of Government inspections (both at Thida and Super English), tough going trying to teach the kids a number of difficult concepts, and some really consistent heat which has made sleeping a challenge. The good news is that we've all got a 5 day weekend thanks to a combination of Government and Buddhist holidays.

Super English was to open over the 5 day weekend, and I was prepared to assist Peter to teach during this time until the Government intervened and closed all schools over this holiday period (long story). I did managed to get in a weekend in at Khao Sok National Park, which is a beautiful part of Thailand and well worth the trip (Google it!) while my colleagues went off to the islands to make use of their 5 days.

At the guest house I was staying at, I met a young British couple who were holidaying in Thailand; they had only been here for 5 days and it was their first time here. I got talking with them, and they were interested in what I have been getting up to in my time here. When I was recapping my adventures over the past 2½ months, it got me thinking – if they are tourists here having a holiday, then what are us teachers categorised as?

I think this is a good question, if you take a moment to think about it. Could you still call us tourists, considering we are employed here, live here, have Thai friends, speak very basic conversational Thai (well, most of us do) and spend our days and sometimes weekends cleaning the house, ironing our shirts, paying the utility bills and general chores that we would do at home?

Then again, we are not and never will be Thai. It doesn't matter how well we speak the language or how many Thai friends we have. I have gathered that Thai people like us just the way we are; they are comfortable with us being foreigners and feel that this status quo should stay as is. There is also the issue of location; in Surat, the locals are used to us – they know who and what we are, and we get treated really well and with respect. As my experience this weekend has shown, if any of us head into tourist Thailand (the VIP section), we get treated just like everyone else - like we have been here for 5 minutes and we know nothing from nobody.

So, what's the answer? I think there is a middle ground here, perhaps the term working resident or the like could be applied. This isn't to justify our existence here or to raise us above the typical full moon partier, but to call a spade a spade. I honestly forget the last time I spoke English in a restaurant here when ordering my food. Today I managed to drop a potential 300 baht tuk tuk fee from Tesco Lotus to Amphur Rd to 20 baht, only because my Thai teachers taught me how to bargain in Thai like a Thai person does (stop trying to rip me off!).

All this in only 2½ months - imagine what I'll get up to tomorrow.....

I've got a feeling
By Tristan Rentos
19 July 2009

Due to the Thai Government closing all language schools in Surat Thani area because of Swine Flu, this past week I have been working less and sleeping more. This week is also somewhat of a transition week as two teachers are leaving us, with three new teachers arriving to start their new life in the Land of Smiles.

Every time the topic of new teachers comes up, I always think of Band of Brothers. For those who don't know, Band of Brothers is an excellent TV series which centres on a company of soldiers who are involved in the liberation of France and invasion of Germany in World War 2. There is one episode which features 'replacements' (I'm not using this term to describe our new teachers), who come into the company to replace dead or wounded men. These new soldiers are not initially welcomed by the company's combat veterans and have to earn their stripes to be accepted.

I think one of the best things about Super English is that new teachers are encouraged and welcomed from the moment they get off the plane, and while every teacher needs to do their very best when teaching there is never a sense of needing to prove your worth to be accepted, or needed to show up anyone else just to get ahead. I have been here for 3 months now, and never has a day gone by when I feel like this is a valueless exercise and it's time to go back to Melbourne.

These new teachers also have to go through everything that I did 3 months ago. David and I had a chat about this a few days ago – how well we have assimilated into Surat Thani, gotten to know our way around, made friends with the locals and learnt enough of the language to get around. Looking back at everything that has happened, I have perhaps forgotten how difficult this was, especially considering that I was here by myself and I didn't have everything in place like I do now.

Now that I have been here a while and I've been through the process of adapting to Surat Thani and Thai culture, I think that there can be no hard and fast rule as to how well you do over here personally – i.e. the individual sets the pace. Some people find it so difficult to be away from the family, friends and their everyday life that they become dependent on others to keep themselves from getting homesick or culture shock. Others have come intentionally here for the peace, quiet and general relaxed attitude that Thailand has to offer and seek time apart from the collective. Either way, the support is there if you need it – all you need to do is reach out for it.

Getting better all the time
By Tristan Rentos
02 August 2009

Thanks to the rampant escalation (or lack of) Swine Flu around Surat Thani's schools, the past two weeks have been a fractured mess of not so much work and far too much downtime. Nevertheless, I don't think there is a better place to have such downtime than Southern Thailand.

It's funny how a lot of downtime can change your perspective on things. As I write this, I am sitting in a restaurant in my new favourite place in the world – Khao Sok National Park. I have come back here on my long weekend, and honestly I could not think of a better place on the planet that I would rather spend my downtime in. Khao Sok exudes peace and quiet from every orifice, every blade of grass – the hyper-inflated Koh Samui spa resorts have nothing on this place if you want to relax and be at peace.

At the moment I am doing an impromptu English lesson for Tey, a Burmese immigrant who works at the guest house I am staying at. Tey is here with her sister Dao to try and save some money for a better life back home – the only problem is they have to work day and night seven days a week to achieve this goal, whilst earning a comparatively very low wage. This situation is common in Thailand where cheap Burmese labour has allowed wealthier or even middle class Thais to employ housekeepers, nannies and cooks to make their life easier. A Burmese live-in maid can be employed for less than US\$100 per month.

Tey is perhaps the nicest person I have met in my time here (definitely in the top 3), and although I like Tey very much and want to help her as much as I can, I am taking this volunteering of my time as a sign that I am growing confident as a teacher and that I enjoy doing what I have chosen to do.

Being confident in your lesson plan and yourself as a teacher and a person is something that is touched on in Super English training, perhaps not as much as it should be. It takes guts to stand up in front of 55 kids every morning and do our thing, especially in those first couple of weeks. It also takes guts to engage a local in conversation, especially when you don't know much Thai (if any), yet we all do these things on a daily basis.

I think that all the teachers who get the most out of their Thailand experience and the ones who can stand up every morning and say "I can" – in and out of the classroom. I hope I am one of those teachers when my time here is up, only time will tell.

The Price is Right?
By Tristan Rentos
23 August 2009

When I'm on one of my weekenders away from Surat, the tourists I meet on my travels always ask me the same question: How much do you pay compared to what we pay?

I think this is a sore point amongst some tourists. While nowhere near as bad as in nearby countries such as India, there is a dual pricing system in Thailand. Most tourists are very much aware that Thais pay less than they do for most goods and services, and feel that this is some form of discrimination against them. This, however, could be argued both ways as the Thai person who is serving you is very much aware that you are spending the equivalent of their yearly wage on a holiday in their country, so the logical conclusion in their minds is that all tourists are so wealthy that they can afford to pay a bit more.

Anyway, back to the question. As I wrote in my previous article, in my opinion we (teachers) are somewhere in between a tourist and a local. To give a case study example, this is how I compared to a tourist on my last trip to Khao Sok:

| Item Description | Tourist Paid | I Paid |
|-------------------------------------|--------------|--------|
| Bus Ticket from Surat to Khao Sok | 250b | 100b |
| Similar room at the same guesthouse | 400b | 200b |
| Entry fee to National Park | 100b | 50b |

The mathematically minded will notice that I am 400 baht up even before drinks and food have been ordered. So, what's the secret to getting local prices? In truth, there isn't any secret – there are no special hints in this story. The only reason I get these prices is that I can do something that a tourist can't: I can legitimately cry poor, tell them that I am a teacher and not a tourist and hope that whoever is selling believes me. If they don't, then I pay tourist prices without the big dollar wage to back everything up.

Final thought: If you are contemplating coming over to teach at Super English or in Surat for any other school, consider this – Thailand is a wonderful place to live and I enjoy living in Surat very much, but don't expect a lobster and champagne lifestyle on a beans on toast budget, especially if you aren't prepared to ask for it (and not in English).

That was just your life
By Tristan Rentos
18 September 2009

I forget what movie the quote comes from, but all good things must come to an end. We have one week of teaching left in this semester before our month off, and we unfortunately must say goodbye to Victoria, Dylan, Scott and Clair, who are all moving on after spending at least the past year (or in Vic's case, 3 years) as Super teachers. (added later - Victoria has changed her mind and decided to remain with SE for at least another semester, but probably longer)

When experienced staff of this calibre move on, it presents both a problem and an opportunity to the decision makers in charge, regardless of the type of organisation they command. It takes time to develop the existing (such as myself) and especially new staff to be as good as those who are leaving, but it also gives Peter a chance to change anything he feels is lacking as the new staff have not developed a set way of doing things. 'Super English 2.0' (as I am calling it) has a lot of work to do, but I feel very optimistic about next semester even though we are not quite over the line yet.

These holidays will also be the first time that I have been back to the 'VIP Section' of Thailand (see my first article), as I will be off to Phuket for the vegetarian festival. I have not been to Phuket since January 2004 (pre-tsunami) and I am looking forward to seeing how the place has changed in almost 6 years. What I'm not looking forward to are the tourist prices, the tourist touts and crowds in general; I have been spoiled by quiet Surat and the friendly locals who reside here, and I'm not too keen on being asked if I want something every 10 feet I walk down the road.

Looking back on my first semester as a teacher and my first 5 months as a resident in Thailand, honestly I couldn't be happier here. Yes, we've had a few issues to work out but for the most part working for SE and teaching my kids has been a hugely positive experience, both for my students as they learn English and for my own personal development. I genuinely like teaching my kids and helping them achieve (maybe not the naughty kids if they're being really bad!). My Thai language skills are getting better every week and I'm now capable of having basic conversations in Thai that I could only dream of 5 months ago when I was really struggling to feed myself because nobody spoke English.

When it's all said and done, I can't think of a reason to head back to Melbourne for a long while yet. Similarly, I can't think of a reason to leave Surat. The magic continues.....

New look, same purpose
By Tristan Rentos
02 November 2009

I know it has been a few weeks since I last updated my journal, but this feels like the opportune time to fill you in on the crazy ride the past 6 weeks has been. I don't think my life has ever been this hectic or full or fun. It went somewhat like this:

End of semester – This went without a hitch. We had a farewell party for Vic, Dylan and Scott at Super English, then taught our final lessons before exams. At Super English, we had a skittles tournament on the last day of term which worked really well. The best news out of this was that Vic decided to stay at Super English (yay!)

Summer Camps – Emily, Sarah and I worked the October Camp this year, which ran from the 5th to the 9th. The majority of the students that attended were my kids from Thida (which made remembering names very easy!). We went to KFC, Khao Tapet and Pool Koff, and spent the other two days at Super English playing games and practicing our English. A splendid time was had by all.

Holidays – As part of a farewell to Scott, some of us went down to Khao Sok for a few days of R & R. The rain and leeches were out in force, as were the good times. After that we said our goodbyes to the departing teachers, and met their replacements. The two Chris's came down to Phuket with me for an introduction to (fake) Thailand, along with some sunburn and late nights at the pub.

The new teachers – We have four new teachers this semester, all from different countries and backgrounds. Chris M from Canada, Chris A from England and John & Janet (a married couple) from Texas have all integrated well into teaching and Surat society, and are all nice people to hang out with.

The parents – Mum and dad came to see me from late October to early November. It was good to see them for the first time in six months, and after showing them Surat Thani I took them to Khao Sok for some peace and quiet in the forest. They enjoyed Thailand and it is entirely possible that they'll be back.

Back to work – Thida and Super English both started again on October 26. It was really good to see my kids again, even if they didn't speak any English over the holidays! I have one new class this semester, a level 7 class at Super that was previously taught by Vic. I am confident that these kids are both brilliant students and eager learners and I look forward to seeing what I can do with them. Anyway, there's a brief summary of the past six weeks. Hopefully the next six weeks won't be as crazy!

Until next time, cheers.

Looking after your health
By Tristan Rentos
14 December 2009

To buy or not to buy? That is the question that all teachers who come to Surat must answer before leaving home regarding health insurance. Despite a number of reminders from my mum, I chose not to buy overseas insurance in Australia as it is very expensive (\$360 for 3 months) and I knew that I could get something in Thailand that would provide at least basic medical coverage.

The past few months have seen several Super Teachers go to hospital for necessary medical treatment. As I have been known to be 'accident prone' in the past, I did some research on the best (and least expensive) ways to get medical treatment that provides coverage at Thaksin Hospital (a private hospital which is the best in Surat Thani):

1. The Siam Commercial Bank Debit Plus Cards (Gold and Silver) – These cards are great. Firstly, Siam Commercial Bank is the bank that all Super Teachers use, as their service is excellent and one of the staff at the main branch speaks English quite well. The Debit Plus cards provide health insurance up to 5000 baht for the silver card (costs 400 baht to purchase) and 25000 baht for the gold card (costs 1500 baht to purchase) as well as being a standard debit card to draw money and buy things. You can use these cards every time you go to hospital and there is no limit on the amount of the times you can use it. Several SE teachers have the silver card, including myself.

2. Siam Commercial Bank Health Insurance – I found out about this product two weeks ago. For a yearly fee of 1600 baht, you get 50000 baht coverage every time you get into trouble. I am looking into buying this after Christmas.

Looking at this from a financial viewpoint, if you were to purchase the Silver Debit Plus card and the Health Insurance for 2000 baht (US\$62) you would have medical coverage up to 55000 baht (US\$1720). This might not seem like a lot of money when you consider how much healthcare costs in the US, but unless you do yourself a serious injury and have an extended stay in hospital you will not run up a 55000 baht medical bill here, even at a private hospital. The only thing that this doesn't cover is the cost of any emergency evacuations, but as SCB is a nationwide bank these insurance options work in hospitals all across Thailand.

I hope this helps, and saves you some money if you accept a job at Super English and are worried about insurance.

Stars and Planets
By Tristan Rentos
31/02/2010

I learnt a very important lesson this week, and seeing as though it's been far too long since I updated my journal I thought I'd share it with you: Be thankful for what you have.

Since arriving in Thailand (it honestly feels like a lifetime ago even though it was only in April 2009) I have encountered many people who have not had a life as 'privileged' as mine has been. My parents are not millionaires by any means, but they certainly aren't short on cash and I have never had to go without my entire life. I have made the choice to live and work in Thailand, and I don't regret this choice for a second, even if I do earn less in one month here than I did in one week back in Oz. You come to Thailand for the love of this remarkable country and its wonderful people, not to make your fortune.

For some reason, I have never given much thought to the plight of my Thai friends. I know that they earn substantially less than I do, and they have to work longer hours for their money. I know that they don't get as many perks in their job and most people live 'hand to mouth', month in month out. I have always considered this to be the status quo, just the way it is. Until tonight.

A large part of life is playing the hand you're dealt, and obviously not everyone has been dealt a royal flush from birth. I recently heard some very sad facts about a friend of mine that made me think about my own position in life and how lucky I am. As a foreign teacher, I am very well paid (by Surat standards), I have a great house that is rent free and I can go on a weekender anytime I want because my job affords me that luxury.

When you start hearing things such as her parents are both dead, she has no money, she lives off the charity of her friends, she lied about her age just to get a job, she can't take any time off when sick because she literally can't afford it, I think to myself: what sort of s*!t is this? Where I come from, this situation is rare to non-existent, and it would be all over the newspaper and current affairs programmes if it did happen simply because it's the Australian way that everybody gets a fair go, and this is not the Australian way.....

This, however, is not Australia. This is Thailand. Different country, different rules, and we have to respect those rules. Still, as I learn this valuable lesson and gear myself up for the last four weeks of teaching, I will wake up tomorrow thankful that the stars and planets have aligned themselves so I have the chance to live my life the way I want to. When it's all said and done, are compassionate people they way they are because they are born that way, or because when given the chance to be compassionate, they always take it?

Until next time.....

A Good Year
By Tristan Rentos
23/02/2010

One of my favourite films that I can watch over and over again is A Good Year. Based on a novel by Peter Mayle, it stars Russell Crowe and Abbie Cornish (both Australian actors). The film is about a greedy and self centred stockbroker named Max Skinner (Crowe) whose life revolves only around himself and his work, until he inherits his uncle's Vineyard in the South of France. He goes to the Vineyard with the intention of selling it to make more money until a series of events make him realise that he is living a 'half life' and he needs to re-evaluate his priorities.

This is not one of Russell Crowe's most popular films, but it is my favourite and one of the reasons that I decided to relocate to Thailand. I was not a greedy stockbroker, nor will I ever inherit a Vineyard in France, but I did feel like my life in Australia revolved solely around work.

Looking back on all that's happened over the past 10 months, I now realise that life is more than just the pursuit of making money. From the very moment Peter picked me up from the airport I have felt very comfortable, relaxed and content. My job has made a difference in people's lives as all of my students have learnt something over the past year (some have learnt more than others) and I have never felt like getting up in the morning was a waste of time. Sure I get tired as working with small children is very energy intensive, but at the end of the day (or year) this job has never been about the money, it's always been about the kids and the satisfaction you get when they start taking your training on board.

Living in Surat Thani has been ideal for me. I'm going to be 29 soon, so I'm a bit past my 'partying prime'. After living in Melbourne for the past 18 years it has been good to live in a smaller town when the locals will always invite you over for a quiet one every night of the week, regardless of how their day has been. Thai people don't take work too seriously, and while this can be frustrating if you need something done quickly, it is great when you want to relax. There is never any sense of urgency here in Surat, it is a bit like The Shire from Lord of the Rings (although our Hobbits are called children over here).

Now that I've been here for one school year, would I recommend this to you, the interested reader? Well, I'm staying on for another year, so you could take that as a recommendation. If you are considering coming to Surat and working for Super English, I suggest you think about what your priorities in life are. If money, western luxuries & food and working with adults are your priorities then you may want to think a bit harder about your next choice. On the other hand, if you want to teach some of the cutest, most fun kids; relax at the worlds' best beaches and experience a new culture without all the tourist nonsense then the choice could be very clear.

I am honestly looking forward to the next school year already – this is just the end of the beginning!