

A Look Back – One Semester in the Books

by Kristin Brown

4 months of life in Thailand. As I write this, there are only 3 school days left of my first semester here. It's hard to wrap my mind around the fact that I've already been in Surat over 4 months. Moving to a foreign country is exciting, but the really exciting and awesome part is learning to live in a new place - learning your way around, getting used to the culture, experiencing ups and the downs, learning new things, experiencing things you didn't expect. With only a few days left of my first semester, it's the perfect time to reflect on my first few months in Surat. Let's rewind to my first week here...



I hopped off the airplane in Surat and was bombarded by unfamiliar sounds, sights, and smells. Everything was different, but in a good, exciting way. It was my first time in Asia, but thankfully at first glance I was already liking this new place.



A view of a Surat street from the back of a tuk-tuk our first week here.

Now, when you move to a new place, you realize how many everyday tasks you have no idea how to accomplish by yourself. I didn't know where to take my dirty laundry, how to get a tuk-tuk, how to say anything other than "hello" in Thai, or even where my school was. I didn't know how to get a cell phone and I didn't know how to ride a motorbike (in the craziness that is Thai traffic, anyway). Once I did learn how to ride a motorbike, getting from Point A to Point B always meant I was part of a humorously large farang (white-person) motorbike gang following a veteran teacher around. My first night here I went with some other teachers to the night market. I remember roaming around, mesmerized by the sights and sounds of the market, and being a little nervous about how to order food. When I went to a restaurant, I took recommendations from the teachers that had been around because who knew what those strange looking letters on the menu said.

As far as teaching, I taught 4 years in the States, but I knew teaching a class of 55 Thai kiddos would be somewhat of a different ball game. I worried about if my students would like me and if I would be able to manage a classroom of energy-filled Thai kiddos. I was nervous on the first day of class, but I was surprised by how well everything went the first day.



My first day teaching at Old Thida.

Overall, my first week in Thailand was pretty similar to what I expected. There were a lot of things I didn't know how to do and many things I didn't know where to get, but this was expected. It was an exciting first week. I was really thankful for the help and friendliness of the SE staff and veteran teachers during my first week here.

Let's fast forward one month to November. By now, I had learned to drive our motorbike and was getting used to driving in the Thai traffic. Learning my way around town came a lot easier than I had expected. I had made a point to learn the names of the main streets early on (most street signs have the street name written in Thai and in western letters), so I was feeling much more confident about getting around town without my little farang motorbike gang.

I also started taking Thai lessons and was picking up on some basic Thai. Frankly, at first I was terrified of Thai, because it is so different than English, but focusing on only a few new phrases a day helped it seem more manageable. At this point, the surprising thing to me about learning Thai was how sometimes certain aspects of the language were really easy to learn, but some things just seemed flat out impossible to pick up on. We were making some progress though, and I had already learned more than I thought I could. By now I was feeling much more confident "ordering" food at food stalls and restaurants by using the sophisticated pointing technique. I had also learned the names of some popular Thai dishes, which helped with ordering food. It might seem like a little thing, but every time I learned the name of a new Thai dish, remembered it, and successfully ordered it again, I did a little victory dance.



Successfully ordering food at night market, in Thai!

By our 2nd month here, November, I had also learned where to take my dirty laundry, and even picked up a rug and some other items at the store to make our room feel like "home." Figuring these things out was easier than I expected, especially due to the veteran teachers and Super English staff being so helpful. There was always someone just a quick phone call away ready to tell me where to get an oil change, what kind of gas to put in my bike, how to get somewhere around town, etc. I was surprised to meet so many other teachers from other companies in Surat who did not have anywhere close to this level of support. Always having someone to answer my questions helped me adjust much more quickly than I would have otherwise to life in Surat.

By November, I had been teaching over a month and was surprised at how well it was going. I had learned a lot about teaching in Thailand from the help of Peter and bouncing ideas off of the other SE teachers. I was getting the hang of lesson planning and teaching was becoming easier and easier.

Now it is February and we've been here 4 months. I've really learned my way around town and even know a lot of the side streets. At first Surat was home to school and back and a few places around our house. Now I go to places all over town. If I need to get a tuk-tuk, I know how to tell the driver where I want to go in Thai and get (close to) the price locals pay. I know where to take my laundry, how to get minutes on my cell phone, the best fruit stands to go to, and so much more. Eric and I eat at new restaurants all the time and also have our usual "go-to" places. When we first got here, I was always a little nervous about going in to a restaurant if I didn't know what to order and they had no English menu. Now I have no problem going into a place even if they only serve 3 things and I have no idea what they are. We just point to something or ask in Thai,

"What do you have?" We even know how to make basic conversations in Thai!

Overall, our first semester in Thailand was even better than I expected it would be. Getting used to living in a new country was exciting (and still is exciting). One thing I was surprised by was how exciting little accomplishments seemed. I suppose this goes along with not being able to do much on our own at first, so it was always exciting when we figured something out, got to a new place on our own, successfully found and bought an item we were looking for, etc. Our first 4 months here were a wonderful adventure. It was full of new experiences, both expected and unexpected, lots of learning, and many good memories.