

Letter #9 - Thailand of the North



Mekong view from Thai to Laos

Ending our two-day Mekong journey from Luang Prabang, Laos, we dock in Huay Xai, where we pass through a small Lao customs post, then buy a ferry ticket for the Thai side. We hustle down the bank to a long rusty pirogue and toss our bags in two inches of muddy water. Hanging over the river like a “tail,” the outboard engine roars into action and after a few minutes we reach Chiang Khong. Immigration officials smile their greetings. *Sawadee kah*, Thailand. A land that defines mellow.

Once a dusty northern Thai border town, Chiang Khong has benefited from growing tourism and trade, the site of a nearly-completed bridge co-financed with China (whose other local investments include Lao fisheries, rubber, and banana plantations). We check into our new riverside hotel and watch the traffic on “our” Mekong—cargo and passenger boats, long-tails, and dinghies. The landscape is the same on both banks; although Thai infrastructure is better developed, Laos is making fast progress.



Chiang Khong

Further east along the river, Chiang Saen has views of three Golden Triangle countries—Myanmar, Laos and Thailand—an Opium Museum and access to local hill tribes, also with cross-border links. We continue south to the booming city of Chiang Rai, where I need to research locations for *Into the Fire*. I discover an old airstrip from which Eve and Ross will be transported into southern China to rescue her kidnapped daughter.

Other scenes may take place in Chiang Mai, further to the south, approached through lush rolling landscape, both cultivated and wild. Especially wild are the sudden sharp up-thrusts of mountain that emerge from placid green as if by volcanic movement. It seems that Thailand is like that, calm and gentle with rare but sometimes violent political drama.



Chiang Mai Night Market

The orchid city, Chiang Mai, is known for its Night Market, once a small local bazaar, now a vast sprawl of sidewalk and street vendors, a raucous, good-natured magnet for the world where everything can be obtained, from fine handicrafts to “Tiffany” jewelry, mango strips to German hofbrau, girls’ tennis dresses to suitcases for everything you couldn’t resist.

A fan of Thai massage, I go the next morning to a serene spa where I am asked to choose between soft, medium and hard. They smile when I say hard and I yelp when the massage begins. But by the end I’m smiling too, ready to face the high road to Yunnan, China, where Eve and Ross will find her daughter, Dina, before fleeing down the Mekong. Then we will all return home.

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