

TRAVEL: Thailand, continued

Not to long ago, The Redemptorist Center was built right in the same compound. The Center has 144 air-conditioned rooms with cable TV, refrigerator and telephone. Forty-eight rooms are especially equipped for visitors with disabilities. There is also a large accessible pool inside the compound. In fact as far as I saw it was the most accessible accommodation in Thailand and more accessible than many in the US.

Our last three-day stop was Chiang Mai, located in northern Thailand in an area that differs in many ways from the rest of Thailand, in climate, culture and history. This is the home area for many of the well-known handicrafts that Thailand is known for. We had many opportunities to witness their production, which has remained virtually the same for hundreds of years. We visited area called Handicraft Village where there are many showroom, each offering items of a different of these crafts. Each showroom also has an area where you can watch the production while learning about the process. While witnessing the production of crafts as silk making, lacquerware, and umbrella making it was amazing to see the skill of these artisans possessed and the speed at which they could work.

The group spent some time at an elephant training camp just outside of Chang Mai, where we saw what valuable assets the elephant has been to the logging industry and what was involved in training them. We also had an opportunity to ride elephants, which most of us did including me. Now if a person like me who can't stand wants to ride an elephant the only way to accomplish this is to have someone who is strong pick you up from the loading platform and place you in the seat. Thanks to the strong arms of Yong one of our guides, this went smoothly and to our Mahout the elephant trainer, I felt very secure during the entire event even when we crossed some very rough terrain. You can't exactly say that an elephant is easy to get around in, but with my scooter I didn't have any trouble negotiating the somewhat steep terrain. However, if you use a manual wheelchair user plan on needing some strong assistance.

We enjoyed a commanding view of the city and valley from a 14th century temple that sits on a mountaintop just outside of town. It was made accessible by means of a newly opened inclined elevator that wisks you to the temple.

For me, the trip was fantastic! You could tell that there was allot of people who want to make this exotic, colorful, and friendly destination welcoming to everyone. Sethaphan Butthani the director of the Tourism Authority of Thailand, NY office, who accompanied us on the trip, demonstrated every step of the trip that he believed in the goal and was committed to making this part of the project work. A perfect example of this was when we arrived in Chang Mai, our vans were waiting and they had a brand new portable ramp. This was there just to make it easy for Phil the other wheelchair user in our group and I to

get in and out of the vans. What I didn't know was it came about because of Sethapan. During a casual conversation with some members of the group, the topic of vans came up and how people had made them accessible with the use of portable ramps. Someone there had a picture of one, which Sethapan faxed ahead to the people who worked for the tour operator in the Chang Mai office. When we arrived there a couple of days later they had made one just from the picture and some dimensions.. It was constructed of lightweight aircraft steel and worked wonderful. Plus the company has it ready for future use.

Diethelm Travel provided the guides and most of the transportation for our trip and they sent three that were with us the whole trip. They also provided divers and a variety of additional help when they might be needed and for a group that consisted of only ten people including two chair users. I found out that two of them were there mainly to learn about travelers with disabilities and how to provide service to them. So Diethelm Travel demonstrated that they were also believers in the project as well did the interest shown by the group of tour operators that we had a meeting with in Bangkok.

The rest of our meetings were with Officials of various government agencies. At each meeting all the attendees spoke with great pride about the projects they have in the works and planned, to create a more accessible environment in their regions. It has been only about ten years since this way of thinking started growing and now snowballing to the point that travelers with disabilities and their citizens with disabilities will see a more accessible Thailand.

For now if you go, planning is the key to a successful trip. There are resources out there to help you plan your trip. Believe me the time you spend planning for a "trip of a lifetime" will be well worth it.