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Ballooning



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Destination: Thailand pg 18

Flying Miss Norma pg 28

Going Digital pg 44





Destination: **Thailand**

Singha International Balloon Fiesta



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When my father and I got invited to attend a balloon meeting in Thailand, we just couldn't say "no." With icy roads and Dutch dark, cold February days still freshly in mind, we headed to the sun six time zones East of us. We were invited to attend the Singha International Balloon Fiesta in Thailand's northern located city Chiang Rai. Singha is a Thai beer brand, and as no television and publication advertisements may be made for alcohol and cigarettes in Thailand

anymore, this seemed to be a very proper way to spend part of the advertisement budget on.

We flew from home to Bangkok and arrived there during the Chinese New Year. A day and a half of sightseeing followed and a highlight was the opportunity to visit China Town by tuk tuk, a motorized three-wheeler. When the driver asked us where we were from, I made him guess, as I'm always curious how people perceive me and why. Wearing my Scandinavian travel gear, I imagined he'd mention Denmark or Sweden, but his answer was surprising! The driver started laughing while pointing at my nose, saying "Poland! You have Poland nose!"

From Bangkok we flew on to Chiang Mai, where we met some other balloonists with whom we'd drive to Chiang Rai. My father and I ended up in a van with a balloon team from Poland.

In Chiang Rai, an entire hotel was

booked solely for balloonists. There were participants from, among others, China, Vietnam, Japan, Ukraine, America, Brazil and even South Africa. All balloon teams were assigned their own Thai crew members. This was surely challenging, as none of them spoke any English and most had seemingly never seen a balloon before.

In order to introduce the foreign teams to the inhabitants of Chiang Rai, a welcome parade through the streets of the city center was organized. All teams were driving with their baskets on open trucks, having their burners ready for some action. It was a challenge not to burn down the tree leaves and the criss-cross of electric wires hanging randomly above the roads. Some spectators obviously seemed a bit uncomfortable with the abundance of happiness due to this foreign invasion. Yet, others were fanatically smiling and waving. There was no Dutch team to represent, and as I also strongly feel European instead of Dutch

only, I didn't mind representing another nation, which became Poland. Seems like the tuk tuk driver from Bangkok was farsighted!

The three Polish balloonists totally matched the stereotype of the Polish love for strong liquor. The first bottle with 'only' 37% alcohol was finished just after the start of the parade. During the parade, they got out of the basket twice to buy more rum. I gave myself an imaginary pat on the back for knowing my limits and not going with the flow!

Everyone gathered on a parking lot, where we were welcomed by a band, students on bikes carrying heart shaped helium balloons and by some stunningly beautiful ladies. Oh no. Wait. Some of them had mustaches! They were in fact ladyboys!

After dark we drove one more round through the streets of Chiang Rai. We gave our thumbs up to locals and tourists from Poland, Ukraine and Sweden, looking at the whole spectacle from the side of the road. We even dragged two American couples and a French girl on board for a while, just to share our joy with them. It's a delight to see the excitement in one's eyes when being allowed to use the burners for the first time in their life.

Singha Park is developed with a high sense of floral beauty, especially when seen from above. Cycling paths flow smoothly through colorful gardens and the tea fields surely provide a wave of repetitive beauty. Behind a fenced area, there are giraffes and zebra's not being exploited for tourism purposes. At the entrance of the park, the often photographed golden lion, being Singha's logo, can be found. It was here that the balloon event with approximately thirty balloons took place. For me, the event began with a flight with American pilot Maria Chierruzi and her beloved partner Scott. After a controlled splash and dash, we drifted over tea fields, bamboo, banana trees and rice fields. We eventually landed in a dry rice field behind a vast row of trees, out of sight of our crew members. We didn't have a radio with us, and even if we had, it wouldn't have made much use anyway. A curious local stopped by with his motorbike. When Scott wanted to ask him for help, he did nothing but nodding and taking tons of selfies with the balloon. Without any other form of



Top: Parading with the Polish team. A polish nose??? Photo by Nienke Bos

Center: Cycling paths and colorful gardens. Photo by Bennie Bos

Bottom: The Singha lion; beer with a grow!! Photo by Bennie Bos



communication, he simply left again. It took another hour and a half before our crew managed to find us.

Later in the week I made two other flights with English (but living in America) pilot Derek Hancock. His crew members didn't let us out of sight for a second while we watched the little villages passing by from above. I totally adore having a sneak peek into someone's life like this. I saw a lady fanatically burning off the hairs of a pig's head, a man with some newborn chickens and boys playing basketball at a party which was about to start.

Even though there was a competitive element present in the schedule, it wasn't as hardcore as the competitions we all know. Most of the balloons lifted off near a lake in which three flagpoles were established and on which three tubs floated too. A fair amount of money could be won by either grabbing one of the flags, or by throwing little balls into the tubs. The rule of lifting off at least one kilometer away from the targets in order to mark a valid score faded away after the first flight. A new rule, not touching the water, was, however, imposed.

South African pilot Conrad van Wyk was flying his hopper while wearing nothing more than swimsuit. He literally swam to the targets, with his cloudhopper attached to his back like a giant backpack filled with hot air. He was surely the master entertainer for the audience, as he repeated his trick several times more later that week. With the rule of not touching the water being in force, he even cleverly showed up his own inflatable little pool, through which he'd not really be in contact with the water himself.

On the last day of the event, with still many prizes to give away, it was decided that the balloons would lift off around the lake, and that they could try as often as desired to fetch themselves a prize. This meant a lot of muscle power was needed from the crews, as the balloons were walked to the other side of the lake again and again when the first attempt hadn't been successful. One of the pilots even tried five times, without result. The audience adored it, and so did I. I planted myself near the water side and all of the fun unfolded right in front of my eyes and the lens of my camera.



Top: Grilled pork anyone? The sights one sees from a balloon! Photo by Nienke Bos
 Center: Competition was lighthearted and included many waterborne targets. Photo by Bennie Bos
 Bottom: South African Conrad van Wyk took to swimming to the target! Photo by Bennie Bos

Having said that, I do wonder if people nowadays still take time to fully enjoy things just for their own pleasure. I love taking pictures, but I do not watch the world passing by on a digital screen. The Thai people visiting the balloon event seemed almost obsessed by taking selfies. Interestingly enough, they don't seem to be embarrassed at all to pose in front of their phone's camera to take thirty pictures of themselves in a row. I guess I'd feel a bit awkward when doing that.

Especially in Bangkok I intentionally put my camera away for a while in order to just stand somewhere and observe what was happening around me. However, these moments were often disrupted by Asian tourists coming towards me, wanting to take a selfie with me. I always tried to start a conversation in hopes of gaining valuable life lessons shared by random strangers. Nevertheless, after a calmly asked 'Where are you from?', only question marks appeared in the eyes of the ones wanting to have a picture with me and my rather bright hair (or was it because of my Polish nose?).

The evenings were booked for ballooning purposes, but during the day there was a lot of time for sightseeing. The main tourist attractions in and around Chiang Rai are some magnificent temples. Along with my father and balloonists from England and America, I visited a Black Temple. The South-Africans had been telling me they considered this place to be a bit Viking-like, and I could imagine why. The black temple and the surrounding houses are made of wood and house a large collection of animal horns, skins and bones.

The White Temple we visited impressed me much more. It's a modern temple which didn't exist before 1998, but it's a true piece of art. It's completely white and adorned with little mirrors. The entrance is marked by hundreds of concrete hands reaching up to the sky from the ground. It's a surreal place with many surprising elements including a sculpture of a robot that could have easily just jumped out of a Transformers movie.

The last day of our holiday in Thailand was marked by a trip to the Golden Triangle, the place where the borders of Thailand, Myanmar and Laos can be seen in one glance. This place used to



Top: The author was in-demand for selfies! Photo by Bennie Bos
 Center: The Black temple and its collection of horns and more. Photo by Bennie Bos
 Bottom: The impressive White temple with its surreal sea of hands and transformer-esque sculpture. Photos by Bennie Bos



be one of the main opium producing areas in the world. After a refreshing boat ride over the Mekong river, we tried some of the best dumplings in the least touristy place we'd been all week.

The masterpieces of the balloon event were the daily nightglows. They attracted the largest audience. Some pilots were tethering, taking passengers up for a small fee, while others stood on the field in front of the lake, covering the pasture with colorful balloon fabric from normal hot air balloons and special shapes like a wasp, black sheep and a witty Chinese pig wearing a skirt. Yet other balloons were standing on ponds floating alongside the shore of the lake. The mirroring in the water was magnificent, strengthened by the usage of powerful light beams. Even though it was really crowded at the festival area, I didn't feel unsafe at all. The atmosphere was jovial and calm, and the vibes were solely positive and joyful. I guess this had to do with both the Thai way of life, as well as with the cautiousness of Europeans concerning terrorist attacks. I was hesitant to mention the last matter, but just when writing it down, I heard on the news about yet another terrorist attack in Turkey.

It's probably better to continue with a lighter topic, being food. A variety of food was being sold at the festival site, from squid on sticks to century egg (worth Googling). I still wonder how the Thai handle their waste though, as I never saw any bins (trash cans) yet there was no litter laying around either.

Having said that, there were hardly any toilets. I missed dairy products in Thailand actually, and chocolate too. The taste of a green tea flavored KitKat left me somewhat puzzled and my first encounter with soy milk wasn't really a successful one. Unfortunately the holiday had come to an end all too soon. We went from 30 degrees Celsius to -6 degrees Celsius (86°F to 22°F) in just one plane ride. I still hear the echo of the piano man in one of the restaurants I'd been eating: "Countly loads, take me home," followed by a passionately sung "It's good to touch the green green glass of home." I wouldn't have minded staying a little longer.



Top: The nightglows with added lighting effects were the highlight of the event. Photo by Nienke Bos
 Center: Balloons joined the glow floating on pontoons to add a unique aquatic element. Photo by Bennie Bos
 Bottom: A fond farewell to ballooning in Thailand! Photo by Bennie Bos

