

## Learning to Smile at Bangkok

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After almost a whole day of traveling, a group of 24 economics students and our tutor Nils Holinski arrived at Bangkok international airport. We were soon to realize the first cultural differences. We got on an airport bus, which was not designed to carry a group of our size, let alone our luggage. Squeezed and melting in the humid heat we drove to Sukumvit, where our hostel was located, while the bus driver, kindly, left the doors open to cool down his passengers.

The first night was mainly used to discover how cheap everyday products were. It is no problem to have a full dinner on the street at 60 to 80 cents. Many of us gladly used this opportunity. As a first impression one can note that the Thai mentality is substantially different from the West European. As Thailand is still in the stage of development much of the infrastructure is unfinished and social problems frequently catch the attention of the visitor. Maybe because of this, Thais are relatively relaxed about rules and regulations. Friendliness and service, however, are of an extremely high standard, which reflects that Thailand is a hierarchical society.

On the following days we visited many fascinating institutions. The first day was entirely devoted to our partner university, Chulalongkorn. Staff as well as students made it easy for us to feel welcome. We were given an insight not only into studying and student life in Bangkok, but especially into the Thai culture itself. We learned a lot about festivities, food and music – of course we did not get around trying to speak some Thai.



Safecoms and two daughter companies of the Allianz group were meant to leave an impression about how business is done in Thailand. None fell short of expectation. At Allianz Mondiale we were introduced to a car insurance scheme, which is already the largest on the Thai market. Because of a fatalistic culture insurance companies face problems convincing consumers of the necessity of their products. Allianz Mondiale overcame this difficulty by arranging business to business relationships with all major car manufacturers except Toyota. Roadside insurance from Allianz Mondiale is part of almost all new cars you buy in Thailand. Further we were presented a marketing strategy aiming at establishing a direct consumer relationship. Not all of us were convinced by the concept of an insurance café and a lively discussion rounded off the visit.

Safecoms particularly drew our attention to the growing internet connectivity in Thailand and the resulting market for the products of the firm.

All companies made a point about the complex social norms, which govern the Thai workplace. Our alumni at Allianz Ayudhya is very concerned with a positive work atmosphere and therefore walks around the office frequently to actively check whether there are queries. After the interesting presentations given, a lively discussion arose among some students and our hosts, especially debating about country specific differences in working and lifestyle. Luckily, some of us had the chance to intensify this discussion during a comfortable dinner later that day.

At the different “economics related” institutions we tried to find out how Thailand was coping with the financial crises and how the political instability had affected the economy. Additionally, we were interested in the Thai AIDS prevention policy and in the soft aspects of the Thai economy – the security of property, the degree of corruption and the demographic development.

Both UN ESCAP and the World Bank provided detailed answers and the question round at the Thai Stock Exchange gave a great insight. Thailand has not experienced a credit crunch, because tight regulation was

Project	Budget (billion bt)	Party in charge
• Transport and mass transit	571.5	Bhumjaithai
• Irrigation	238.5	Chart Thai Pattana
• Energy and alternative energy	200	Ruam Jai Thai
• Education	137.9	Democrat
• Health care	99.4	Democrat
• Community development	91.7	Bhumjaithai
• Tourism development	18.5	Chart Thai Pattana
• Others	73.8	NA

Source: Finance Ministry/Bangkok Post

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introduced after the Asian financial crises. However, declining exports have hit the Thai industry and encouraged the government to pass a fiscal spending package. At the Thai Board of Investment we were provided with a very economic view of the current investment situation.

At the Dutch embassy and the Dutch Chamber of Commerce we obtained a valuable economic estimation of the consequences of the political turbulence placing it at two to

three percent growth reduction. We also learned that the Netherlands are the major source of European FDI, which is rooted in a historic Dutch-Thai partnership. Enjoying the beautiful atmosphere at the adjoining park, we were able to pose questions especially about the work life that embassy members have.

Another special visit was our day at Shell. The very warm welcome and the amazing dedication to arrange a pleasant visit were overwhelming. The many short and different presentations gave complete picture of the company and many were surprised how diverse Shell's tasks are.

Besides the economically interesting insights, of which we gained many, experiencing the Thai culture was a major part of our program. Although the groups split for different events everybody gained a good personal impression of Thailand and of Bangkok's night life. Having a cocktail in a roof top bar over viewing an ocean of lights of a 12 million people city is an experience that will be remembered. Many of us got hand tailored suits and dresses as more permanent, but no less beautiful memories. The trip to Bangkok was a great success and it has stirred the curiosity about Asia of many participants.