

1.5 Year Testimonial/Retrospective by Levi Shand

Hard to believe a year and a half, three semesters, has passed me by. A lot has happened. When I arrived in Surat, I'd only had experience freelance teaching in Spain. I ran my own show, so to speak, and did well enough but I'd never taught in a school, and I'd never been a member of a moderate-sized expatriate group. Like I said, a lot has happened.

Rather than hash back through all that has happened, as do so many of these testimonials, I thought that it'd be more instructive for you and for me if I were to offer up some of the things I've learned as testimony that the Super English, well, the Thailand experience is one well worth having. Here are some points, in no certain order:

This is a job.

Whether you're just finishing university or somewhere in your transcontinental circuit, you are finding yourself looking into teaching ESL in Thailand, at Super English specifically. You have stumbled upon a job, an occupation which pays for your time. What you haven't found is a patron for your extended vacationing. You haven't found a community of tourists who do a little teaching in their spare time.

Super English is a place where people pursue professional as well as personal goals. Don't mistake me; not everyone here is some kind of hardcore teaching nut, but we are teachers when we're on the clock from eight to four every day of the week. I've seen people party too hard over the weekend and embarrass themselves come Monday, when fifty-five fresh faces are looking up to them for guidance. I've only seen people come late to work when circumstances have truly been extenuating. I've seen people put too little effort into their teaching; I've seen those same people return mid-contract to their home country, too, of their own accord.

I've learned that I'm out here traveling the world to work, albeit in capacities different to those I'd find myself in stateside. When you find yourself working hard, respect comes to you from all sides: your students, your Thai teachers and your colleagues all will be there to support you. If you decide to come to Thailand for anything else, it will be evident immediately to everyone and your experience will be colored by that.

Thailand's a developing country.

Savannah and I rent our own house. It's a unique place, set in the jungle. While it's mostly wonderful, I don't have a bathroom in my house. It's a separate structure that leans against and is attached to my house. It has running water, but I have to pour water by hand down my western-style toilet. Sometimes the city shuts the water off for several hours at a stretch.

I don't have a kitchen in my house. Rather, there's a hose outside and a termite-eaten wooden platform upon which I do my dishes. We have a toaster oven and a small portable gas burner. We wash our glasses out before we use them. We eat out almost every meal.



My Sink

Cute little geckos crawl all over everything and likewise, crap all over everything – even us – in the house. Our clothes molder, our mattress and pillows molder, and the canals near our house reek of everything the locals dump into them. Down the road there is a hovel compound where Burmese migrant workers live among garbage and putrid standing water. Down the opposite way, a man owns a pig-tailed macaque that we see scampering up palm trees to harvest coconuts.

Meanwhile, at school, many of the children have iPhones or iPads. Sometimes their parents drive European or American cars and live in western-style houses. Before and after school the high-schoolers can be seen preening, using their smart phones as hand mirrors. Around town there are chic little coffee shops opposite filthy machine shops, and street food carts parked outside KFC. The palm plantations, like the one I live in, are being razed to make room for apartment complexes.

A lot is happening here.

In many ways Thailand seems to be in an interesting stage of its development. There is construction everywhere, unemployment is low, and things like coffee, cheese and wine are starting to become available in more and more places. Thus modernity is creeping across the land, radiating outward from the biggest cities. For long-term expatriates, in some ways the Thailand they came here for is going or gone. I've learned that I'm living in a country that is pridefully moving away from its rural past toward a distinctly Asian model of urbanity, and that knowledge has helped dispel some of the romantic notions I had about this country before I arrived. Thailand's still an amazing place, just not exactly for the reasons I'd built up in my head.

Coming here has made me better.

Surat and Super English have proven invaluable in development as a teacher and individual. Before I came here I'd never lived in a developing country and I was, well, totally ignorant about SE Asia. I was at best a mediocre teacher.

For me, simply doing things like getting to work, keeping up with chores and communications, and going shopping are so much harder here than they were in Europe or North America. Here, I drive a motorbike to work and it's like threading a needle through a moving hole every morning and afternoon. In recent years Thailand's done a lot to curb its reputation as a dangerous place to drive a motorbike, so I can imagine that drivers were much worse before and will continue to improve as the years pass.

Very often I'm disappointed during and after shopping trips. In this case, I'm running aground of my own ill-conceived expectations. My time here has taught me to live with less and enjoy it. I have a feeling that lesson will be helpful in the future.

Professionally speaking, I've become a good teacher. I don't balk when unplanned things happen, and am not surprised by things that would surprise a less seasoned teacher. Like Peter told me during our Skype interview, after one year with Super English I can walk into any K-12 classroom on a moment's notice and deliver a fun and engaging lesson. Before I came here, I couldn't boast that. Most teachers can't, but nearly all SE teachers can.



Me, teaching

Personally, living here has helped me whittle down the possible things I could do with my life. Unlike most teaching jobs, working with SE has allowed me a great deal of free time to ponder and pursue other things that might interest me beyond teaching. That process has left me with some clear and satisfying passions to work toward. Before I came here, I had no idea what I wanted to do with myself; now I do.

I am glad I came here. I met good people, I had valuable experiences and I profited by them. Plenty of times in my life I've not been able to claim that about a long-term job or project. This time I really can.