

## **Out With The Old, In With The New: A One Year Testimonial**

**By: Stuart Ziegler**

“What kind of restaurant doesn’t have toilet paper!?! I am supposed to do what with that dish sprayer?”

...One year later and I still haven’t bought a roll of toilet paper since arriving in Asia. Just one of the many things I faced, defeated and eventually lived in harmony with. One year ago I was boarding a plane to go on my first adventure to SE Asia. Prior to now I had traveled to Latin America, Canada, and Australia, but never to the Oriental wonderland that I have grown to call home. Before traveling to Thailand I went on a 7 week backpacking trip through The Philippines, Indonesia, and Malaysia; all of which seem less developed and homey for a westerner. If one is ever thinking about residing in another country in SE Asia I suggest they do their homework before making the commitment because culture shock will hit you harder in these places.

The task of living and thriving in a foreign country that speaks a different language, is based on different principles, and is hotter than your wettest dreams will take some time to adjust to. It is not the same as strapping on a backpack and going island hopping, SCUBA diving, and mountain climbing. It is different because all of those little annoyances such as inconsiderate loud people, language barriers, not being able to order food you want, and other things can be avoided from bouncing around every couple days. When you rent a house and work in the same place day in and day out you have to learn to accept your fate and not run away from it. This is a job and a lifestyle change comes with it whether you choose to accept it or not. You learn to fight back in a psychological way as opposed to using quick and brainless physical and verbal reaction. You are forced to internalize life as you have never known it before. Quite possibly a life that you may look down on or even highly disagree with because it doesn’t match up with the way you were raised. Remember, beauty is in the eye of the beholder. Eventually if you are patient enough you will see you discomfort turn into embrace and you frustration change into curiosity. It takes most people time to adjust to the new life here, but my best advice for a new expat is to not expect a thing because your expectations will be the source of your struggles.

As far as life on a daily basis is concerned I much prefer my life here when compared to the western lifestyle I was leading back home in America. We all struggle daily with the little bits of nonsense that could bring a weak person to their knees, but that is the beauty of it all. You watch yourself grow stronger and become more adaptable to the unfamiliar, only if you will take the time to see it. My job is at Old Thida and I teach P5(10-11 year olds) for 23 hours a week. This job had high highs and low lows at the beginning, but I have found a balance to help me breeze through the work days more peacefully. My age group is literally a headache waiting to happen sometimes, but this is the same with all kids of this age no matter where you are. Despite the headache they cause, the amount of joy these children bring to me is priceless. They have the energy of little kids, but the attitudes of “know-it-all” teenagers. Through my struggles I love them all the same and wouldn’t trade my experience for another. The work environment outside of the class is not as outgoing as I would have hoped despite my attempts to smile and joke with everyone, but I am sillier than your average person so maybe I am the crazy one. From my experience the Thai teachers tend to keep to themselves and give help when help is

asked for. It is important to be able to swallow your pride and ask for help in a polite and appreciative manner. Don't ever lose face! There are a few who are extremely friendly and go out of their way to help us if we are in need. Free lunches at Thida will grow on you if you give it time and effort. Sometimes they are extremely good, and other times I find myself eating a plate of white rice because I can't handle the extreme fishy flavors or fiery spice the Thais were raised to love. Free coffee is always a perk too. Once I got into the swing of things with my classes the only annoyances I still faced were language barriers, wifi connectivity issues, and the inexcusably excess use of loud music and microphones during assemblies. Thais love to pump up the volume and I am genuinely surprised more people aren't deaf here after experiencing Thai night clubs, block parties, political rallies, and school assemblies. It is what it is, it is different, it is nothing personal, and it is Thailand. Thankfully over the past 12 years SE and Peter have managed to collect a hefty amount of resources that are at our disposal daily. The Super English teachers I work with help create a good work environment and strong friendships outside of work. I love all my students to bits despite their insanity and I will never forget or stop missing their smiling faces that could cheer me up on my lowest days. Farewell Thida!

Some people reading this are probably curious about money matters, as all of us young broke travelers know that it is hard to find good up to date information on the topic. I don't want to spend much time on this, so I will quickly break down my financial experience here in three areas, but remember this is personalized to my lifestyle and I live an uber simplistic life. So if you need western food, movies, bars, clothes, Asian trinkets, and load of weekend trips, then your budget and savings will differ from mine. I will express figures in USD to help make it easier. I make 29,000 baht a month which is equal to about 950\$ as the exchange rate stands. I currently spend about 95\$(2,750 baht) a month for my portion of rent and utilities; my house is HUGE with AC, hot water, wifi, and fully furnished (basic Thai style). Outside of this I currently budget myself another 200(6000 baht) dollars for all other costs, not factoring in emergencies, replacements or accidents. I can usually fit in a couple western meals and one weekend trip away without much drinking involved. I have managed to save about 5000\$(150,000 baht) in the 10 months living here and it hasn't cramped my lifestyle, so YES SAVING IS POSSIBLE! A new motorbike, which you will most likely invest in, will set you back about 500\$(15,000 baht). I would show up here with no less than 2000\$(60,000 baht) for emergencies and startup costs. It is easily possible to save half of what you earn here if you are financially savvy.

From our smooth visa process to the monthly SE parties we have been well taken care of. Peter has been great to let us be and go about our business in our own way. Although I have coached children in the past, I had never taught in a traditional classroom setting. Without these freedoms I would have struggled more. Peter and the managers treat all of the employees equally and are always available to chat. There was never an occasion Peter couldn't make time to answer questions or sit down and help me work through something. You have open ear support from the whole crew at SE.

Here are a couple personal words on Surat if I may. Like anywhere, Surat is what you make of it and it has the potential to offer an outstanding lifestyle on our salary. From the abundance of restaurants (Thai and Western), shopping centers, malls, cinemas, parks, soccer pitches, and native English speakers you can find certain luxuries comparable to home. There are very few things you can't find here. Caves, waterfalls, small mountains, monkeys, beaches, and temples are all within an hour

away. You can go clubbing to the wee hours of the morning or hang out in a local bar and drink cheap Thai whiskey with locals if that is your thing. There isn't a better central location for weekend adventures to other Southern Thai islands, beaches and cities. You can choose to live in the city or outside the noise in the jungle. Options are endless here.

As my days are coming to a close and the anxiety of visiting home inches closer I feel myself missing life here already. The things I expect to miss the most are obviously the food and beaches, but digging deeper into less tangible aspects, leaving seems even more upsetting. I spent 10 days of my October holiday in a silent meditation retreat and it changed my life for the better, helped me understand this way of life, and melted my ego away enough to see pure beauty in this culture outside of my own insecurities. It took me almost 9 months to begin to understand the Buddhist way of life, but my basic understanding holds higher value than any other life experience in my short 24 years on this planet. The lessons I have learned are personalized to me and I hope that everyone who makes this step can find the treasures I found along the way. Just remember if you are digging for treasures, your perception of value might change by the time you uncover your box full of worthless gold... but if it doesn't then Mai Pen Rai! ONE has their entire life to find LOVE and happiness!

Special thanks to all members of the SE family for everything, you were all a valuable part of my journey!