



Chiang Mai

Text : Martha Berner
Images : Apirak

A Bicycle Journey to Peace



Ever go looking for a monk you don't know, who isn't expecting you and who may or may not even exist where you are looking? Oh, and by the way - he's a *farang* (Thai word for foreigner). Actually, the *farang* part is how we managed to find the monk at all. I'll start from the beginning.

In the spirit of this month's Buddhist holiday, *Magha Puja*, we decided to dedicate "I Love Chiang Mai" to a Westerner who has entered the monkhood and lives in our beloved city. We began our search at Wat Umong, one of Chiang Mai's most beautiful and unique temples. Built in the late 14th century in the foothills of *Doi Suthep*, the heavily forested temple is named for its unique tunnels. *Umong* is the Thai word for tunnel, and this beautiful maze was built into a large mound created for just this purpose.

After a series of fingers pointed in a general direction and repeating '*farang*' about half a dozen times to different monks, we came across a small wooden structure located near one end of the *wat's* beautiful lake. We offered a polite "*sawadee, kap*" and "hello" in the general direction of the *kuti* and, in only a moment, the door opened and out came Ernst Christen. Even as a Westerner, I found myself unexpectedly in awe of the large, pale, orange-robed man standing before me, and it occurred to me just how rare such a sight is here in Chiang Mai. Sure, I'm accustomed to seeing plenty of the more petite, Asian men draped in orange, gracefully gliding through town. But Ernst, shall we say, is not like the rest.

The middle-aged Swiss man was immediately warm in his reception of the three strangers armed with a camera and notebooks, requesting to sit with him and ask personal questions regarding his journey into the monkhood and life in Chiang Mai. He invited us to join him, on the floor of course, on a quaint little deck built along the side of the house.

It seems like every *farang* living in Chiang Mai ended up here, not because of an initial intent to do so, but rather after one unexpected opportunity (or mishap) after another lands them here. Before they know it - they're in love. Ernst's experience is no exception.

“The bicycle practice and the meditation practice are the same. You are confronting yourself’. With only his bicycle and a few belongings, Ernst often found himself alone, unable to communicate with those around him.”

About eight years ago he found himself living in Lampang working as an industrialization manager, overseeing the production of plastic parts for cars. After a few years, the job ended and he returned to Switzerland. But what stayed with Ernst was the heart and soul of the people of Thailand. He spoke of his experience working with Thai people and compared the nature of his staff, slow to anger and able to see any problem through without getting *jai ron* (hot-hearted), with the often more explosive attitudes of the West. It wasn't long before the now-divorced Ernst Christen decided to journey to Chiang Mai for a meditation retreat at Wat Umong.

Having studied Buddhism as a teenager, he'd often considered the idea of becoming a monk. However, marriage and children were not conducive to this type of commitment and Ernst had always let it go. "I played in my mind about becoming a monk. But it was not possible because I was married." After returning from a life changing experience at the retreat, Ernst began to sell his possessions and properties and prepared for a journey to life anew here in Thailand. "It took me two years to be free of everything."



Days of meditation and writing

To help him prepare for such an important transition, Ernst decided to make the journey from Switzerland to Chiang Mai by bicycle. Over a period of eight months, he pedaled through Switzerland, Germany, Austria, Slovakia, Hungary, Moldavia, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, China, Laos, and finally Thailand.

"The bicycle practice and the meditation practice are the same. You are confronting yourself." With only his bicycle and a few belongings, Ernst often found himself alone, unable to communicate with those around him. He continued to discuss the similarities between his experience on the bicycle and his experience as a monk, and explains that even though he is only sitting in his *kuti* at Wat Umong, he is traveling everywhere, in his mind. "When you practice Buddhism, there is a danger that you will wake up one day, a moment in a practice when everything in your life changes and it [the practice] becomes easy, the most logical thing to do in life. [An understanding that] This is how it is meant to be."

Altogether, there are 227 rules of conduct for a monk, including fasting in the afternoons, abstaining from indulgences such as music, entertainment, alcohol and drugs; and, of course, he must be celibate. He says that some rules and regulations regarding monk conduct differ from temple to temple. At Wat Umong, Ernst is free to come and go as he pleases, and when asked about the challenges of adhering to such disciplines, he replies, "The target is not to follow all these rules, but to purify our conduct. To purify our mind, develop so called wisdom and intelligence."

The Swiss man's days are filled mostly with meditation and writing. He translates Buddhist texts from English to German, specifically those from the teachings of Buddhadasa Bhikkhu. Ernst also considers embarking on another bicycle journey, perhaps through Australia and North and South America.

But even as he speaks of journeys near and far, it is hard to imagine Ernst being gone forever. Early in our conversation, he stated, "I lost my heart to Chiang Mai." And I believe him.

For more photos and additional information regarding Ernst Christen's bicycle trip and translations visit www.ernst-christen.ch.



WEATHERWISE:

What We Can Expect In March 2010

Text : Sivaphol Illustration: Ruang-Khaw



Whether the times they are a-changing - the Western view - or spiraling with minor variations - as the traditional East believes - is a matter for discussion. So too with the weather. Is the world undergoing a temporary and minor warming up before the next, inevitable, ice-age in, say, about five thousand years time (see Durant's *The History of Civilisation* for the argument that civilisations are just brief spells of hand-warming before the big chill returns)? Or can we expect cataclysmic and unpredictable disruptions to the old patterns, brought about by our failure to live in balance with Nature? More frequent and extreme El Ninos: more cyclones, floods, droughts? We shall see in due course, no doubt.

If the patterns maintain themselves this year, at all events, this is the month when the **temperature** makes its biggest rise, averaging 26 C° overall - some 4 C° higher than in February - but showing some considerable difference between the beginning of the month, when mornings and evenings still bring that touch of coolness to remind us of the 'winter' past, and the end, when we're really into the hot season. However, as always, up in the hills the extremes are greater than down here on the plain, the sun blasting you during the day, but the steep drop of the evening making you wish you'd brought that jacket along after all.

It's also the **haziest** month, with next to no rain to clear things up. Don't expect any view worth talking about from the platform of Wat Prathat Doi Suthep, unless there's been an unusual shower. In fact, from the city you aren't likely even to be able to see Doi Suthep, only a matter of four kilometres away.

On the other hand, humidity's down to an average of 56%, the lowest of the year, and that makes the heat a lot easier to take.

This is also the time for **forest fires**. In the past, you'd see spectacular blazes lasting days in March and April on Doi Suthep-Doi Pui, doing a lot of damage as they climbed into the evergreen forest at the higher level. Now, though, the fire-fighting services tend to get on the case quickly, and you might see helicopters aiding the ground teams, dipping huge 'buckets' into the reservoirs at Ang Kaew and elsewhere, and dowsing the hot spots wherever they find them.

Oh, and April's just round the corner. Now that's *really* hot.

STATISTICS

Average Temperature	26.5 C	Humidity	56%
Average Rainfall	13 mm	Rainy days	1.6
Cloud Cover	2.3/10	Sunshine	279.5 hrs.

(Statistics courtesy Northern Meteorological Station)



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See Ping River Map, B3

The River Ping Terrace
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Ping River Map, B4

For Taxi: เสือนโบราณบ้าน 100 ปี ติดโรงแรมเพชรรวม (See Ping River Map, B3)