

Bangkok Shake and Bake

I had finally made my way from Thonglor station to Terminal 21 inscorching heat reaching triple digits, but pedestrian traffic was fairly light for this noon hour in Bangkok. As per usual, the Pier 21 food court on the 5th floor was my destination for it was there that friend Joe introduced me to Lalla coffee...without a doubt better than McDonald's best McCafe which up to this point was my go to stop on any given day.

Not wanting coffee alone, I ordered fresh mango sticky rice, the popular Thai summer dessert with fresh mango slices served with sticky Japanese rice smothered in sweetened condensed milk. Yes, you would have to try it before passing judgment. A cup of hot Americano from Lalla coffee was itself worth walking 2 miles for.

It seemed like a normal lunch hour crowd...hardly an empty table in sight...but if one is patient enough, an empty table will appear eventually. Being alone, it wasn't long before a table near Lalla coffee presented itself. Sitting down to the delight before me, just seemed to bring a conclusion to the close of a typical morning except that as I was sipping my brew, I started to have a bout of vertigo. I felt like I was starting to spin for no apparent reason. I looked around me and no one seemed to be suffering the same effect. Then my dizziness continued and I looked around me for any others who might be suffering the same symptoms, but none were visible. I hung on to the table and reassured myself that whatever I had eaten or drank would soon pass.

Then in an instant...panic! People started to run from their tables with old men using canes hobbling toward the exits and workers pushing their way to the escalators. Then the flood gates opened and hundreds made a beeline to the available escalators. Faces of fear, crying and screaming only registered that a major earthquake was taking place in downtown Bangkok and here I was caught on the 5th floor where hundreds, only moments earlier, were having a casual lunch.

My gut reaction was similar to the crowd...I started to think, escape. The building is going to collapse and thus headed to the few working escalators, but then, I've been through dozens of earthquakes in Hawaii...it was a regular occurrence, but apparently not so much for the Thai. I then turned to look back at my cup of coffee which lay half consumed. It was damn good coffee and I went back to drink the rest while the floor continued to be spinning. My thought was that I would be at greater risk of falling and being trampled so fighting my way onto the escalator was out of the question.

Restaurant workers were huddled on the floor hugging each other. The young boys seemed to show less fear, but nonetheless huddled together while the girls showed nothing but fear on their faces. Some clasped their hands in prayer while others hugged each other and pulled themselves

closer for reassurance. I thought it the better part of valor to leave as the food court which held hundreds was becoming deserted quickly. Yes, leave was my inner voice.

Upon exiting, the largest crowd, dwarfing anything else I've seen on Sukumvit road lined the streets and along the adjoining soi. All looked skyward as though expecting the skyscrapers to fall. Yes, with that in mind, I walked away from the shadows of any building that might impact me should they collapse.

Apparently business came to a sudden halt. Men tried to get their money back from the food card sellers, but the cashiers were already in escape mode and had all of the cash in plastic bags and ignored the few customers who were clamoring for their money. In a situation like this one, people must surely react in different ways.

Outside Terminal 21, an armless beggar sitting under the BTS stairways could only sit with his empty cup which now was flowing with bills. He would not be going anywhere, but at that moment, I felt it wouldn't hurt to help a guy like him in case greater misfortune might befall all of us. A sudden need to make merit was evident. Pausing in their rush, a few locals stuffed bills in the man's mug. Friends hugged each other or grasped their arms in comfort. Fear and confusion reigned. Messages from Hawaii, Malaysia, California, Bali and Chiang Mai eventually made their way to me as I was still on the streets of Bangkok late into the night and did not plan to return to my hotel anytime soon for fear of possible aftershocks.

The streets of Sukumvit seemly strangely full of foreign visitors...bars, initially emptied out, were now magnets of calmness. Coffee shops were standing room only business and bus stops seem usually crowded. I eventually chose a coffee shop well...ground floor only and with steel I beam supports. All communications ceased as well as the BTS and MRT rail systems. Phone service, out. Internet signals, dead. Images later showed sky trains being tossed back and forth as if being a child's play thing.

A Canadian shared that he was actually on the BTS sky train when it started to shake violently and hung on for dear life. He was assured by other riders that "this" was not normal.

Trying to use my phone brought dead signals and the chance connections soon disappeared. Network connections remained severed. At moments like this, much speculation is born. Would there be aftershocks? Is my family safe? What do I do now? Where do I go?

Major hospitals evacuated their patients into the parking lots according to one doctor friend. Dozens of workers and hotel guests sat outside on the streets and alleyways.

All 7-11 convenience stores, closed.

Burger King were troopers. They were open and fed large crowds whose appetite somehow went into overdrive. Besides cooling off in the stifling midday heat, you could get a cold drink and a Whopper with fries.

My McDonald's closed as did many others.

Thousands milled the streets as traffic ground to a halt. Where to go? How to get there no doubt were on people's minds. In fact, it would be well into the evening before many would even be able to hitch a ride or walk home. Not a single motorbike taxi was available whereas in a normal early evening, dozens would be offering their services on nearly every major street corner.

Four hours after the initial quake and a BurgerKing was doing a landslide business as it was one of the very few places the Indian patrons coming from the Ambassador hotel had discovered as well as nomads like myself.

Venturing out again, I wanted to see what was currently going on. No news on the internet... service was still out. Bars were doing their regular happy hour business with a mostly Falang clientele.

The Aloft Hotel had, by this time, allowed visitors to return to their rooms and so I had access to their lobby bathroom. My concierge friend Art, greeted me warmly and was happy that we were both safe.

The shaking and baking in Bangkok had pretty much subsided after the initial shocks, but the streets remained unusually crowded. It was apparent that those who normally would be riding in tuk tuks and cabs, were now hoofing it on Sukumvit.

After many hours with periodic food and bathroom stops if one could find them, a sudden desire for a McFlurry overcame me and so I chanced upon a McDonald's near Bumrungrad hospital only to find standing room with no empty tables. With a fast melting ice cream in hand and scanning the eatery for a place to sit, there came a smile from across the room and a motion to "come sit here."

A young lady offered comfort to this tired old soul. I gladly accepted and would now find myself in an hour and a half conversation in Spanish, Thai and English. This gal impressed me with her brief resume...former university student in the U.S., Thai police captain, veterinary nurse educated and trained in Madrid and now a PhD. candidate in computer security.

All of this education, travel and talent crammed into a 30 year old non-traditional Thai. That she was from a family that valued education was evident and her family history of a college professor father and equally educated mother revealed a person who was not just about living a life, but making real strides in making a life.

So this somewhat eventful day was capped off with meeting a rather extraordinary young lady. Of course I invited her and her parents to come and stay with Ms Carolina and me on Maui with the caution that with the multiple dozens of invited acquaintances, only friend Susan from the U.S. Pentagon accepted.

Still, while misfortune and potential harm faced us all in Bangkok that day and while the shaking and baking on Sukumvit road may have been the focus of conversation for days after, it was that chance meeting with a remarkably warm, sensitive and insightful young woman that made for a silver lining during Bangkok's first earthquake in some 30 years.

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