

**Sleeping with Ghosts**

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## Sleeping With Ghosts

Monkol and Num left Chiang Mai long before dawn. They had been planning this trip for some time and at last the day had come. Both were students at CMU, the University of Chiang Mai, completing their final year before taking their BA in tourism.

Highway 11 to Lamphun is straight and flat and they made good time on their motor scooters, which although old, were well maintained and in good running order. Traffic was quite light and they ‘jumped’ many of the red traffic lights along the way.

After Lamphun the road began to rise with many bends as it climbed onwards and upwards into the mountains separating Lamphun and Lampang. The rising sun was directly in their eyes as they crested the mountain and they pulled over into the service centre to refresh themselves and wait for the sun to rise a little.

Monkol handed Num a bottle of still cold water as they lay on a grassy bank outside of the service centre.

“How long do you think that it will take us to get to Lampang?”

“Hmm. No more than an hour – it is downhill for most of the way and the road is in good condition. We’ll fill up with benzene at the petrol station there. We can load up with snacks and drinks at the 7-11.”

“Do you think that we will make Tak by nightfall?”

“For sure, maybe we will even stop at Thoen for lunch.”

This adventure had been planned for many weeks and Num and Monkol had been inspired by Yann, a French student at CMU, who

had decided to drive his motorbike to the South. It had taken him several days hard driving to reach Bangkok where he changed his plan and caught a bus the rest of the way. He was undecided where to leave his bike in Bangkok and in a moment of bravado he drove it to the car park and the Central Police Station. He made the appearance of entering the building and suddenly stopped and asked a police officer if his bike would be okay in the car park.

“Of course!” said the policeman. “This is a police station.”

Encouraged by the officer’s reply, he left the bike at the car park while he was in the South and eventually caught the train back to Chiang Mai with the motorbike in the goods van.

Monkol and Num were amused at Yann’s story and changed their mind about driving all of the way to Bangkok. Instead they decided to break their journey in Tak and Nakon Sawan and then return via Sukhothai to see the Buddhist Temple ruins.

They were both looking forward to their overnight at Tak. They had booked a room at a very reasonable rate at the Viang Tak Riverside Hotel.

The drive from Lampang to Tak took nearly five hours. Some of the time the road was through a plateau of rice fields . At others, it wound its way through the forested hills. Everywhere there were signs alerting everyone to the danger of forest fires.

As they passed the turn to Bumbhipol Dam Monkol called out to Nun-

“Hey shall we take a side trip and go and see the big lake there?”

Num replied “I think that we might run out of time and I don’t want to drive through the mountains in the dark. Tell you what, we’ll stop on the way back.”

After a long straight stretch of road they arrived at Thoen. They turned off from Highway 11 and found a small restaurant.

“Tell you one thing Num, my bum really aches!”

Monkol replied. “That’s nothing! Wait until we get on the road to Nakhon Sawan! Say Num – didn’t one of the Ajarns at the university come to live in Thoen? I think that his wife came from here.”

“Yes – I think so. Let’s find out.”

Num called over the owner of the restaurant who had taken their order.

“Hello. We are students at Chiang Mai University. We seem to remember that one of the Ajarns, a medical professor and a Farang, who left CMU came to live here. Are there many Farangs living in Thoen?”

The owner replied. “Yes, I think that I know who you mean. Ajarn Graham. He lives on the other side of the village. This year at the festival and carnival he had his movie camera and filmed everyone”

Num and Monkol looked at each other. “What do you think? Should we go and say hello? Maybe he would remember us.”

“I know we are almost at Tak but same thing applies as the Dam.” said Monkol. “ We really don’t know how long we will be. Let’s stop on the way home.”

They finished their lunch, climbed on their motorbikes and headed for Tak.

As its name indicates – the Viang Tak Riverside is a hotel overlooking the Ping River and the river at Tak is very wide. Num and Monkol had no problem finding the hotel as it was well sign-posted from the main road. The hotel is constructed of two buildings, one newly built and the other much older. As they were staying on a promotional low price they were given a room in the older section. After finding their room and leaving their bags they went exploring.

For a while they sat on the wall overlooking the lido man made lake, with their feet in the water. Bored - they went in search of the night market but looked in vane. Ultimately they returned to the hotel and went to the swimming pool.

“I don’t want to talk bad Monkol, but although Tak city is very large – there does not seem to be much here. Just a lot people driving through in all directions.” Thy sat for a while looking across the river and the various boats coming and going and eventually decided on having an early night.

Early the following morning they back-tracked to the village of Ban Tak. The roads were busy with many motorbikes, trucks and buses going in all directions. Tak is a large crossroads where several highways, including the road to the Thai border with Myanmar and the North-south Highway 1 from Chiang Mai to Bangkok. When they reached Ban Tak they found the old Wat Phra Brorom that entered. A Monk heard their Tamboon and blessed them.

Feeling light of spirit and full of adventure they drove back to Tak and over the long bridge and road to Kampaeng Phet.

Their euphoria was not to last. The road was in a dismal state of repair with vast tracks without tarmac and full of pot holes. Their grueling drive continued by-passing the town of Kampaeng Phet and continuing south.

As they crossed the flatlands between Kampaeng Phet and Nakok Sawan, Num suddenly indicated for Monkol to stop.

“What’s up Num?”

Num pointed ahead to the horizon. “Monkol – whatever do you make of that?”

He was pointing to a strange rock formation which had just become visible, on both sides of the road, some kilometers ahead.

Monkol looked to where Num was pointing. “I have no idea but tell you what.... let’s go and find out!”

They revved up their motorbikes and sped ahead down Highway 1 to find a solution to the mystery.

On the left hand side of the road was a small mountain which was daunting and completely out of place with the plain that lie around it. On the right hand side of the road were several smaller hills. All of their appearances conjured up the word ‘Jagged’ in Num and Monkol’s minds. Just how many years ago did the earth erupt and give birth to these incredible craggy mounds?

“Monkol – have you any idea what these are?”

Monkol shook his head. “But I would like to go and see the big one close-up. There must be a road somewhere.”

Num and Monkol decided to drive on until they found either a road or someone that they could ask.

They found a small shop selling a variety of drinks, snack and toiletries. While topping up their supplies – they asked the old man serving them about the mountain.

“That’s ‘**Khao No**’. Its very famous and made out of limestone. Many years ago King Rama V visited and stayed overnight at the top. At the bottom of the mountain is the Wat Khao Lo and a shrine. If you climb the steps to the top of the mountain you will find a large Buddha Image in an even larger cave.”

“Thank you Lung, we would like to visit the Wat. Which way would we drive there from your shop?”

“Thanks that’s easy – there is an old road leading to the Wat and the mountain a few kilometers along the road. But be careful as it is not paved and in very poor condition.”

Num looked at Monkol and realized that they were thinking the same thing.”It can’t be worse than the road from Tak!”

Num smiled when he paid the old man and thanked him. Together they loaded their provisions onto their motorbikes.

“By the way Lung – how far is Nakhon Sawon from here?”

“About 50 kilometres. If you are staying there, my daughter has a guesthouse.”

Promising to return, Num and Monkol set off in the direction of the road to the mountain.

The dirt road was where the old man indicated and Num and Monkol turned left onto it. They could see both Khao No Mountain and the Wat Khao Lo in the distance.

As they pulled up in front of the Wat, They saw an old Monk sweeping the grounds with a bamboo frond broom.

Both Monkol and Num waived and Num called out –“Sawasdee Khap Phra Song!”

The old Monk stopped sweeping and turned to greet them. He was dressed in faded tan robes.

“We are university students from Chaing Mai and driving to Nakhon Sawan. We are both surprised to find your Wat and Khao No Mountain! Would it be alright if we looked around?”

“You have come a long way... let me show you.” The Monk placed his bamboo broom on a verandah.

“My name is **Phra Tammuni**. Many years ago I was a ‘Walking Monk. But old age has withered my legs and Wat Khao Lo is now my abode. Not many people come here, I think that they are scared - so you are welcome. There is a spare Khuti next to mine and you can leave your belongings and even sleep there if you wish.

Num and Monkol placed their belongings in the spare Khuti and shared their provisions with the old Monk. Slowly he showed them the shrine and the grounds of the Wat – all weather beaten stone after so many years and seasons of hot and dry weather.

The Monk said “They say that this is the hottest place in all of Thailand. Our rainy season is short and that is why the Chedi looks so old. There is no one to help to make it look beautiful.”



He went of to tell them the story of the King Rama V visiting and staying overnight on the mountain and showed them the bare stone stairway to the peak.

“If you wish to make merit – you can climb the steps. At the top you will find a large cave with a Buddha Image inside.”

Num and Monkol looked at one another. For sure – what an adventure!

They waied and said that they would see the Monk later and started to climb the stone stairway. The sun beat down and made it hard and hot work but they were both very fit and gradually made their way up to the summit.

The sun was setting just as they reached the top and they took several minutes to look at the panorama of the landscape. They could see Kampaeng Phet to the north and Nakhon Sawan when they looked south.

They entered the cave and both paid homage to the Buddha Image. The walls of the cave were dry but covered in cobwebs and animal droppings.

Suddenly somewhere from way down in the mountain came a muted rumble which became louder by the second and then stopped. Again it started and Num and Monkol ran from the cave.

When they looked down towards the Wat they could see a black cloud emerging from the mountain. Whatever could it be? Suddenly it dawned on them and, relieved, they realized that it was thousands of bats leaving their sanctuary of the mountain to fly for their evening feed.

Laughing at their own nervousness they once again were startled when they heard something approaching from the other side of the peak. Just as they were about to run down the steps – a monkey appeared – followed by its tribe of family and friends. Num and Monkol threw stones at them and the monkeys scampered off chattering angrily.

“Hey Monkol – do you really want an adventure? Let’s sleep up here tonight in the cave! It may even be that this Mountain is haunted!”

“Hang on Num... I’m not so sure about that. Who is to say that the monkey won’t return and bring more of his friends with him? And what about the bats? I read somewhere that they drink blood from buffalo. Maybe we too will be on the menu.”

“Come on Monkol! When have you been scared of a few monkeys and bats? You’ve got to live a little!”

Monkol wasn’t convinced.

“Listen Num – if you want to stay up here tonight...up to you! But I’m going back to the Wat and staying in the Kutu.”

The debate went on for several minutes before Monkol, feeling quite insulted, started down the steps.

“Up to you!” Num called out after him as he disappeared.

Num was able to find an old cigarette lighter in his pocket and after searching around, found enough dry vegetation and wood to light and make a small fire in the mouth of the cave. As he settled down he heard foot steps coming from the steps.

“Ah Monkol ... I knew that you would come back. I’m sorry that I said the things that I did but come and sit here by the fire and we can wait until the bats come back to their cave.

There was no reply from Monkol but he did sit down by the fire.

“You know Monkol – they are not going to believe this when we tell about it back at the university!”

Further silence from Monkol.

Num yawned and settling down gradually went to sleep.

The sun rose very early in the mist and Num woke up to see Monkol walking down the steps. Num assumed that he was going on ahead to the Wat.

Gradually, Num also made his way down the stairway and saw much activity down at the Wat. There were the flashing lights of many police cars, a motorbike and an ambulance.

Intrigued he hurried down the steps. When he arrived at the Wat – The Old Monk came up to him.

“Thank goodness you are safe. The police were just about to make a search for you.”

‘Why ... whatever has happened?’

The Old Monk led Num to the shrine.

“Your friend had an accident yesterday evening.”

Stretched out in the shrine was Monkol – very battered and dead.

The Old Monk said “I was just going to sleep when I heard a scream and saw your friend fall from the mountain. I had to walk to the highway to find someone to help”

“No it can’t be – Monkol slept with me last night in the cave!”

The Monk shook his head. “I am not sure who or what slept in the cave with you... but it was not this young man. He has been dead for many hours now.”

Num walked over to the police and the ambulance.

“I can’t believe this is happening. Where will you take Monkol to?”

One of the policemen said “The Sirisan hospital in Nakhon Sawan. We’ll also need you to come to the police station to make a statement.”

Num asked – “What about the Monk. Will he have to come also?”

“What Monk”

Num turned around to point to the Monk and saw only the deserted grounds of the Shrine.

“There was a Monk here. I was just talking to him.”

“No monk here – this Wat has been empty now for many years.”

“But who called you for help?”

“Not sure .... Someone on the highway.”

“Look... Mongol has been my friend for many years. We grew up together and started university together. Can I ride in the ambulance with him to the hospital before coming to the police station?”

The policeman thought for a moment and then said “Sure. One of the motorbike police will follow you.”

Num watched as they gently placed Monkol on a stretcher, covered him with a blanket and carried him to the ambulance. Leaving his and Monkol’s motorbikes in the Wat grounds, Num also climbed in to the back.

At the hospital Num and the policeman followed the gurney upon which Monkol’s stretcher had been placed on, down into the basement and into a large refrigerated room. As the hospital porters were moving the stretcher onto a concrete table, Num looked at the next table along. It also had a body on. The body was covered with saffron yellow robe of a Monk. Num asked one of the porters what had happened.

“Ah poor old boy... he was a ‘Walking Monk’ who was hit last night by a hit and run driver on the highway by Khao No Mountain.”

Num couldn’t believe what he was hearing. He snatched the yellow robe away from the head of the body and found himself staring at the Monk.

He couldn’t be sure if it was the Monk that they had met at Wat Khao Lo or not.

“Did the Monk have any identification on him?”

“Yes.. His ID card says that his name is Phra Thammuni.”

Num collapsed as if someone had hit him with a sledgehammer.