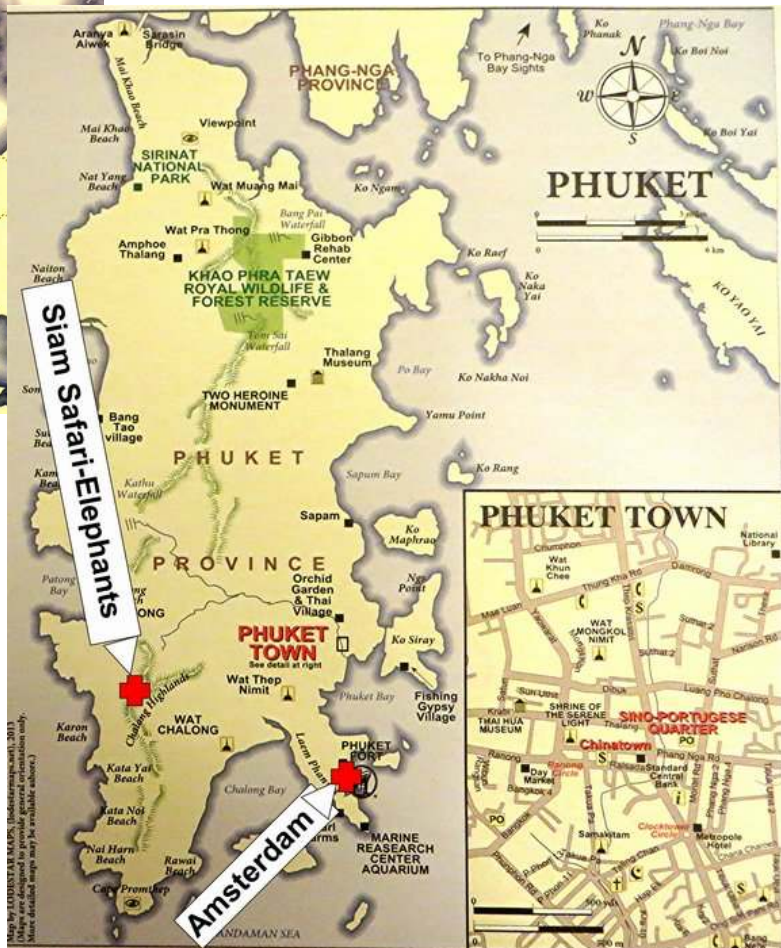


3/21/13 - Day 74–Phuket, Thailand-Siam Safari-Elephants: The approach to the port was a bit unusual in that the Amsterdam had to back down the channel to where we tied up at the pier. The reason for the backing operation was that sand had drifted into the port and there wasn't room to turn the ship around at the dock without high risk of hitting a sandbar. With side thrusters working well the backing operation went smoothly and we were tied up in the port of Phuket (pronounced Foo ket) Thailand at 7am. Souvenir vendors and tour buses were waiting for us on the pier, as shown on the right.



The location of the island of Phuket in the nation of Thailand is shown in the map on the left. The location of Phuket town on the island as well as our tour destination for today is shown below.



We had signed up for a Holland America Lines (HAL) tour called Siam Elephant Safari last summer and had been looking forward to the adventure ever since. There were three bus loads of Amsterdam passengers that left the pier about 8:30am headed for our elephant experience in the hills of Phuket, Thailand.

The buses dropped us off at the Siam Safari parking lot in downtown Phuket. We transferred ourselves to official Siam Safari caravan trucks, as shown below, and headed for the Chalong Highlands where the elephants awaited us.



As we rode through the streets of Phuket Town we had a chance to see some of Thailand up close and took some pictures as shown below.



Here is a residence in the picture on the left. The low hanging electric wires screening the image were present throughout the city. It reminded us of pictures we have seen of New York City shortly after the introduction of electricity in the 1800s.



The buildings looked modern and well kept. The low hanging wires are hopefully just a temporary effect of rapid development.





As we started up the steep grade into the Chalong Highlands a large white Buddha statue came into view at the top of a mountain.



We arrived at the Siam Safari compound and hopped out of our open air coaches.

We were kept as separate groups determined by the original bus number we were assigned on the Amsterdam. Our group was corralled and a pleasant young lady speaking excellent English began our first Safari experience. We saw a demonstration of how a coconut husk is removed



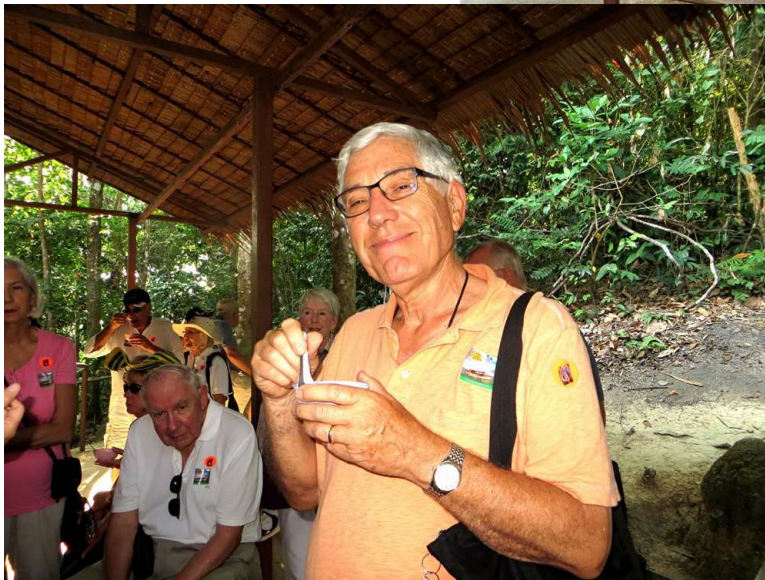
and the contents of the coconut harvested. They emphasized the importance of coconuts for food and cosmetics in the local economy.





After the coconut demonstration we all moved to another stage area where we learned about how Thai Curry is made.

The ladies in this photo on the right discussed the harvesting and preparation of spices used to make the famous Thai curry. Best of all they made a sample for us to taste.



The next event on our agenda was learning about the water buffalo and how important these animals are to the local farmers. The photos below pretty well show where the water buffalo used to fit into the economy. It is doubtful that the sturdy buffalo still plays much of a role with the availability of modern tools and vehicles. However, we still saw a few water buffalo in the open farm fields when driving about the countryside.

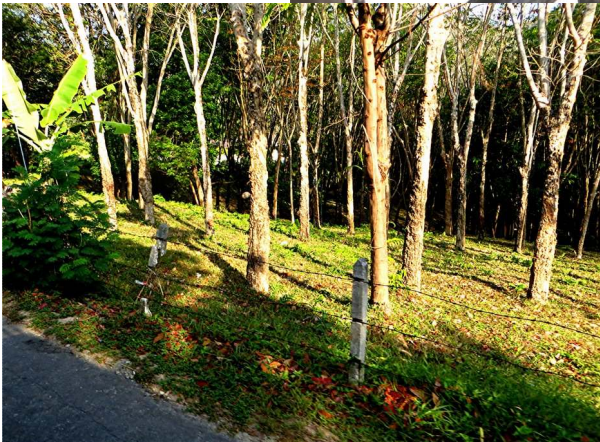


The gentle domestic water buffalo should not be confused with the similar looking cape buffalo that is known for its aggressive and dangerous behavior.

In the photo below we share a bumpy cart ride with friends, Roy and Gayle.



The next subject in our crash course on Thailand rural economy was the refining of rice once it has been collected from the fields. In the picture below is shown a large wooden tub into which they poured raw rice seeds. The teeter-totter like board held a large heavy wooden pestle located over the wooden tub containing the rice. The other end of the “teeter-tooter” was operated by human foot power to raise the heavy pestle and then let it drop rapidly down onto the rice. This repeated action broke the hard husk of the rice seeds to expose the kernel inside. The mixture of husks and kernels were then placed on the broad shallow tray shown in the picture and repeatedly tossed up into a light breeze which blew away the husks and left the valuable kernels for use as food.



The next item on our action packed agenda was harvesting rubber (latex) sap from a forest of rubber trees. We took a short ride to a hillside covered with rubber trees planted in uniform rows, as shown on the left.

Our guides then showed how the bark was cut in a way that caused the natural latex from the tree to flow down into a container that was an environmentally friendly half coconut shell, as shown on the right.

We had seen a rubber harvesting demonstration yesterday in our tour of Langkawi Island. These folks at Siam Safari added a new wrinkle to the process. In the photo below the lady in the bright blue dress has just finished cutting the bark of a tree to get the latex flowing. We noticed that she had a head lamp with a bright flame from a carbide gas source, like coal miners used in yesteryear. We questioned about the purpose of the lamp. It turned out that for maximum yield the bark cutting and harvesting of latex is done in the “cool” of the night and she would need the lamp to see what she was doing.



From the latex collection in the forest we proceeded to a shop where the latex was processed by mixing with formic acid and boiling. It was allowed to cool and harden in the form of thin disks that looked like pancakes. The disks of latex were then squeezed through rollers that removed some of the fluid. That completed the first stage of latex harvesting and the rubbery disks would be sent off to a factory for further processing into a final latex product.



We were about to be introduced to the elephants but before that grand event we were treated to a relaxing moment with several kinds of Thai tea. On the left, Barbara is enjoying a soothing cup while Orlin's mixture of milk and tea cools in a glass.

After having tea we loaded onto an open trailer and a tractor pulled us up a hill to where the elephants were kept.





We gave a wave to friend, Karen (Kween Karen) who we saw along the way.

We got to the elephants and several of the gentle beasts were brought in by their trainers. The lighting was terrible so we didn't get many pictures as they



demonstrated elephants kicking soccer balls and responding to simple commands. One of the more intriguing behaviors was an elephant that had been trained to paint pictures, as shown in the photo on the right.



In the photo on the left one of the proud trainers was displaying the painting produced by his promising student.

Our warm-up session with the elephants continued with an opportunity to feed them. Here in the photo on the right Roy is offering some tasty bananas, peels and all, to a very interested friend.



At last we came to the elephant riding part of the safari adventure.

We were led to a platform that had a floor at the same



level as the back of an elephant. Each elephant had been fitted out with a substantial looking chair for two people. The chair sat on a pile of mats and was held in place on the elephant's back by ropes and straps. In the photo on the left we are getting our final instructions from our guide standing in front of a steel railing that was part of the loading platform. She said that the men who

control the elephants were called "mahouts" (pronounced ma hoot). They start working with an elephant when the elephant is very young and never leave it.

As shown on the right, Roy and Gayle had stepped off the platform onto their elephant and were seated with safety bar in place. The happy couple with their smiling "mahout" (elephant driver) was ready for their ride.



Then it was our turn to step off the platform onto our trusty elephant and we were on our way. There was a good deal of swinging and swaying but with a firm grip on the safety bar we felt secure and comfortable.



The elephants plodded methodically into an old rubber tree plantation that created a jungle of trees, vines and brush. Our mahout was this good looking fellow on the left with a mischievous look in his eye. It turned out he was an aggressive driver who liked to find ways to pass his mahout friends who were ahead of him in the line. As a result we got to participate in several elephant shoving matches before the day was over.

We were passing in the left lane when Orlin took this “arms length” photo of some startled lady riders and their mahout being left behind.

Thank goodness this didn’t trigger a road rage incident!

Of course, Barbara, who had been dreaming of this ride ever since last summer caught the spirit of the moment and whooped it up.



With Barbara’s encouragement, our mahout sensed the need for more outrageous behavior. Here we are passing on the right hand side this time.

In this photo on the right our elephant jockey is pulling off a left lane passing sprint again. After this last passing maneuver our mahout seemed to have made his point and we pretty much joined in with the line of plodding elephants.



However, as we neared the end of the journey our adventuresome mahout diverted his steed off the well trod track onto one that led further up the mountain. This resulted in us getting a topside view of the rest of our elephant train below.



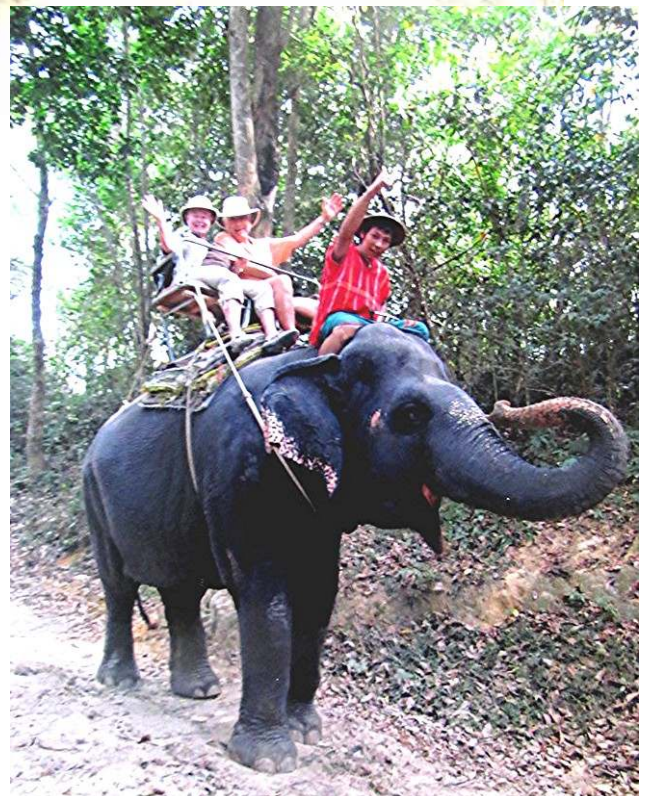
While we were on the upper trail we hailed our HAL escort, Cassandra, and she turned around for this photo below.



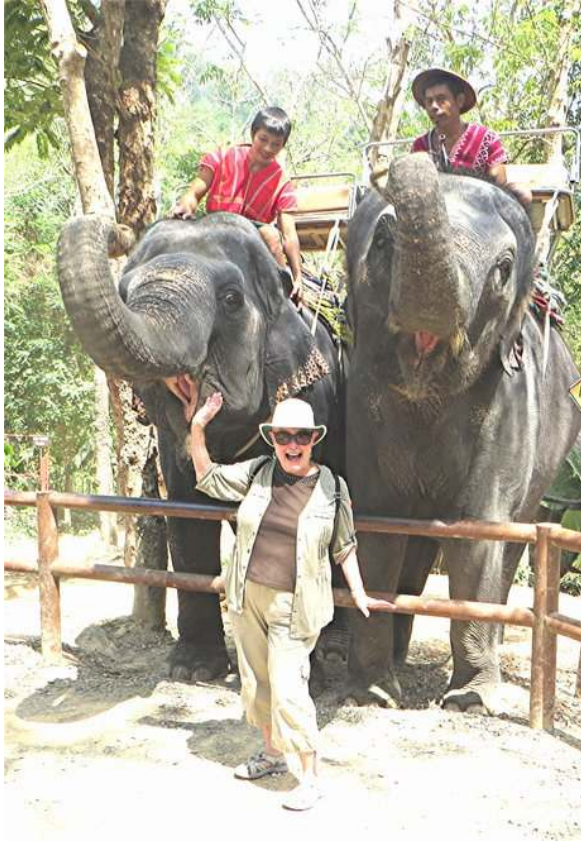
When we rejoined the train of elephants we were much closer to the front than before. We were able to turn around and get this classical jungle elephant safari type photo on the right.



As we pulled into the elephant compound we had the opportunity for another photo to commemorate our day with the elephants. We got the picture on the right which will be treasured for years to come. Our mischievous mahout also gives thumbs up.



Too soon our 30 minute elephant ride was over and we stepped off of our noble beast onto the platform.



There was one last photo opportunity as the obliging mahouts brought two of their huge elephants around to where we were standing. This was too much for Barbara to resist so she ended our adventure with this pose.

Even the elephants were laughing.

We all had a great time and we were able to add another animal crossing warning sign to the collection we started in Australia.



With our visit to Siam Safari completed we boarded the trucks and they took us back to the parking lot where we found our buses waiting. Then it was time for a late lunch at a wonderful Thai restaurant called Srivichai. There were hundreds of choices at the buffet and the ones we selected were delicious.



After lunch we returned to the port of Phuket. On the way we realized that amid all the excitement of the elephants we had forgotten to document the visit of Barbara's library card to this little corner of world. Fortunately, as we pulled onto the pier we saw a "Welcome to Phuket" sign that would serve for the task at hand. We got the photo on the left showing that the little yellow card had made it to Phuket, Thailand.

Before escaping from the heat and humidity on the pier we had to first browse through the souvenir vendor displays, as shown on the left. There were a lot of stalls but we didn't find anything that we wanted.



We happened to meet our two room stewards, Reindra and Ruli, sipping a cool coconut drink on this hot humid afternoon.



We returned to the air conditioned comfort of our cabin and kicked back for the rest of the day. At about 5pm the Amsterdam got underway from Phuket, Thailand, bound for the city of Colombo in the nation of Sri Lanka. We expect to arrive on March 24th.