



## SongKran: A Thai Holi

Veena Patwardhan • May 11, 2010

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The links to India were evident almost from the moment we alighted at Bangkok's swanky Suvarnabhoomi airport. Even the name of the airport sounded more Indian than Thai to us. The magnificent exhibit of the churning of the seas by the demons and Gods—with a huge idol of Lord Vishnu in a classic pose in the center of the tableau—only reinforced the India connection.

We took a short connecting flight to Chiang Mai, well known for its scenic landscapes, tantalizing night bazaars and dazzling, jewel-studded temples, or "wats," as they are called in Thailand. We had arrived in the country in time for the famed Songkran, or New Year, festivities celebrated from April 13 to April 15 of each year. And since Chiang Mai is acknowledged to have the best celebrations, we had decided to kick off our tour of Thailand from this beautiful, ancient city.

At the Chiang Mai airport we were met by the Thai guide appointed to show us around. The lady provided yet another link to India by welcoming us with the traditional "wai," a gesture similar to our Indian "Namaste." Palms joined, she bowed her head to welcome us with the Thai greeting "Sawadee kha" (men greet others with "Sawadee krup") and led us out of the airport lounge to our hotel vehicle parked outside.



Before we could get to our car, we found ourselves cornered by a Thai TV channel team waiting to interview tourists arriving in Chiang Mai for the Songkran festival. Pleasantly surprised by the prospect of two minutes of fame on Thai TV, we happily answered the interviewer's questions—Which country were we from? Was this our first visit? Did we know about the Songkran festival? Did we have anything similar in India? (Our answer was an excited "Yes!" to this last one.) The TV crew then wrapped up their session, happy to get some interesting sound bytes from a bunch of very voluble Indian tourists.

If you're wondering why Indians would find Songkran celebrations familiar, the answer is that it's very similar to one of our most loved festivals—Holi. Songkran too involves exuberant water splashing festivities, but not with colored water—just ice-cold water!

During the short drive to our resort, the guide briefed us about the Songkran festival and our itinerary in Chiang Mai. Moments later we caught our first breath-stopping view of the Mandarin Oriental Dhara Devi hotel, its magnificent golden spires giving us the feeling of having arrived at a grand palace. But this was just the façade of the main lobby. The actual resort is spread across 60 sylvan acres dotted with dozens of luxurious villas and suites with architecture that evokes images of a bygone era.

That night we decided to dine at a Thai restaurant, not too far away from the Dhara Devi.

As we feasted on the piping hot soup and the other delicacies that followed, we enjoyed the performances on the stage in the dining hall. Thai dancers dressed in glittering, traditional costumes and exquisite head gear performed ballets enacting the history of the Thai Lanna kingdom and scenes from the Thai version of the Ramayan, reminding us once again about Thailand's association with India.

On the drive back to the hotel we saw that the streets were already decorated with strings of light bulbs and decoratively lit arches in readiness for the Songkran festival which would commence within a few hours.

Songkran is a 3-day festival that marks the beginning of a new astrological year—the Thai New Year. The first day, Maha Songkran Day, marks the end of the old year. The next day, April 14, is called Wan Nao, while April 15 is Wan Thaloeng Sok—the day when the Thai New Year begins.

Interestingly, the word Songkran comes from the Sanskrit word "Sankranta" which means "a move or change"—in this case the movement of the sun from Taurus into the Aries zodiac. The name indicates a link going back to the pre-Buddhist Hindu culture in Thailand. Though the name has a Sanskrit origin, the festival itself has a Buddhist heritage and is celebrated not only in Thailand, but also in the neighboring countries of Myanmar, Cambodia, and Laos.



The next morning was the first day of the Songkran festival and we were warned by the hotel staff not to wear leather shoes or carry leather bags, which could be ruined by the water splashing. After a heavy breakfast, dressed in casual wear, we set off for a first-hand experience of Thailand's most popular and fun-filled festival. We parked the van along one of the main roads, and from behind the safety of rolled up windows watched the riotous activities on the road outside. Bands of youngsters roamed the streets or whizzed past in open trucks with water guns and buckets of water with which they doused one another and others on the street.



The glittering pagoda of the Doi Suthep Wat

Some people had positioned themselves on the pavements with large tubs of water with ice thrown in for added effect, and used water hoses to drench passers-by. We noticed many people had a white paste smeared on their arms and faces and were clutching small plastic bags of the paste to smear on others. "It is a water soluble paste and is applied as a sign of protection against evil," explained our guide.

The water splashing is a symbolic washing away of the bad luck of the previous year. But most importantly, Songkran is meant to be a family celebration. During the three-day holiday period, those who are working away from home go back to their towns and villages to celebrate with their loved ones. And despite the large scale water-splashing in public, Songkran is traditionally celebrated in Thai homes by sprinkling scented water on one another and pouring it over the hands of parents and elders as a sign of respect and to ask for their blessings. The elders in turn bless the youngsters and wish them luck and prosperity. During Songkran the focus for older people is more on spiritual activities like "merit making," which involves washing the Buddha images in their homes with scented water, visiting temples to pray and to pour scented water on the Buddha images, and offering alms to monks.

The lively celebrations on the streets were so infectious in a few places we even spotted foreigners joining in the merry-making and "water battles." One of my friends who dared to venture out of the van to click an "in-action" picture scrambled back inside within minutes, gasping from the experience of being doused with ice water.

There were still a few hours to go before the traditional parade would wend its way down the main streets later that afternoon. In the meantime we decided to visit the famous Maesa Elephant Camp where we were treated to a fantastic display of elephant skills. The amazing animals even played soccer and painted pictures, including self portraits! And guess what we discovered? This camp has a tiny Ganesha temple; the elephant God is worshipped by the mahouts. Visiting this shrine once again sent our thoughts winging back home to India.

By the time we stepped out of the camp, a big crowd of locals had gathered on the pavement outside armed with "water" ammunition. The famed Thai sense of "sanuk"(fun) was amply evident here as well. There were joyful shouts of "Sawadee Pi Mai" (Happy New Year) as people already soaked to the skin continued with their water splashing revelries.

Soon it was time for the Songkran parade. We saw a convoy of beautiful, flower-bedecked floats bearing golden Buddha idols slowly making its way along the scheduled route. As each float passed by, people lining the streets approached the idols and poured scented water from tiny decorative silver cups over them.

On the last day of Songkran, we visited Chiang Mai's most famous Buddhist temple—the Wat Phra That Doi Suthep. The hill-top temple has a distinctive golden chedi or pagoda visible from most parts of the city. From the top we could see several ornate shrines with golden Buddha statues surrounding the sparkling main pagoda. There were also food and souvenir vendors there, resulting in the mix of spirituality, tourism, and commerce that seems to inhabit religious sites around the world nowadays. The temple was swarming not just with tourists but locals placing flowers, lighting joss sticks, and offering rice and other food items to monks.

A skinny guy with a camera slung around his neck and flashing an open album with pictures of tourists approached me. "You want photograph? Only 50 baht," he said.

I smiled and shook my head to indicate I wasn't interested.

"OK. 40 baht?" the guy persisted.

When I pointed to my own camera, which I withdrew from my bag, he sauntered off with a cheeky "No problem!"



Bathing the Buddha with scented water

Having wound up our fascinating tour of Thailand, I was back again at work a few days later, grappling with the heat and dust of Mumbai. It was so scorching hot that my mind leapt back to the Songkran revelries in Chiang Mai, and I wished someone here would drench me in refreshingly cold water. That would have been s-u-c-h a relief!

#### Getting there:

Most international airlines have flights to Bangkok. The journey from Bangkok to Chiang Mai can be made by bus (around 10 hours), train (around 12 hours; overnight sleeper trains are also available), or air (a short flight of around 50 minutes).

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