

RAINY SEASON IS ON US

My favourite time of the year - not too hot and some refreshing showers. The thunderstorms can be quite dramatic and of course, frightening for some. The reservoirs are finally starting to fill up again and Pattaya welcomes the rain. Not quite the case in SE USA, nor Japan and China coasts that have the worst weather on record by way of fierce storms from the sea. Yet it has been as dry as a bone in Spain - another reason not to live there. Chiang Mai in the North of Thailand got badly flooded in September as well when the Ping River burst its banks - as it seems to do every few years. So really, we are lucky in this part of Thailand. A good solution seems to have been devised to prevent the annual water shortages that badly affect Pattaya and the Seaboard. A pipeline from the sizeable Bangprakong River is now to be built - linking it to our reservoirs. That should sort it out once and for all.

Having mentioned terrorism in the opening of this piece, it would be remiss not to mention the ongoing violence in the South. I have visited there many times over the years and have never experienced anything other than peace and quiet. I guess that there must be long term differences a.k.a. Northern Ireland or Yugoslavia as was. However it does not appear that all these problems near the Malaysian border will ever effect Pattaya, but we never know. Most of our violence here relates to more commercial disputes in areas such as crime, drugs and matrimonial harmony. Let's hope that the current trend of reducing serious crime continues to move the right way. As to more petty disputes such as booze-related fighting at night in areas such as the infamous Soi 6 and wherever European football louts gather, it is to be hoped that this reduces as well. Maybe the expanding volunteer police force here can help that battleground.

The powers that be here continue to be busy on the infrastructure front. Jomtien Second Road seems set to start soon as the surveyors have been round checking alignments and spotting buildings that need to be demolished. More roadworks to come, together with the never-ending construction frenzy that Pattaya is in. It will be great when they complete the Motorway that will bypass Pattaya City. The latest I hear is that in addition to the major road heading through Pattaya East to Najomtien, there will be a link off from Highway 36/the new road to North Pattaya. This will skirt the top of Mabprachan Reservoir and make this area even more accessible. There is also talk

of creating a jogging trail around the reservoir and general improvements by way of a park. Great news. Further south, it looks as if there will be a Carrefour supermarket on Soi Khaotalo. Also, that there will be a 24-hour supermarket on Siam Country Club Road near Wanasin Farm. These long-overdue developments will be a huge boon to Pattaya East - making the area much more attractive. Not only that, but the supermarkets will mean less residents needing to cross Sukhumvit Road - so there should be much less delay in crossing it.

Well, good news for us and bad news for storks. The Suvarnabhumi Airport has briefly opened. Just for an expensive VIP test landing for the world's press. A squadron of Air Force fighters buzzed the runway first to scatter the local residents before the main arrival. These storks must have wondered what the hell was happening. Anyway, they are going to relocate to a nearby rubbish tip that should hopefully encourage the storks and other birdlife to find a quieter habitat. Our dear P.M. has promised that the airport will be fully operational by mid 2006. In the meantime he has promised another shindig there on New Year's Eve. The Bangkok papers are full of news on the airport and what a difference it is all going to make. Not to be outdone, some of our local leaders here have gone to press saying that it will be a boon for Pattaya. One even said that property prices will increase by 5-10 per cent across the board here when it opens. Oh dear, that sounds like a slowdown in the market, as prices here seem to be have been increasing by that amount each month...

Bad news for elephants... Over the years, elephants and their mahouts have been peacefully going about getting residents and tourists to pay for their bananas, other food and some small money to survive. We all know that they are considered lucky and their presence is particularly exciting for young children. Few would bear them a grudge. However, the powers that be seem to have a go at clearing them out of town every now and then. I can see them being a bit of a nuisance in heavy traffic areas such as in Bangkok, but cannot see the harm - particularly in a tourist centre such as Pattaya. Well nine elephants have recently been rounded up and "deported" to an elephant centre for three months. Then, they might be sent to a zoo or back to Surin. The mahouts face fines up to 10,000 Baht. This all appears a heavy-handed move by the Mayor's Office. When you think that the poor mahouts have walked them all the way from Surin (how else would they travel?), it

all seems very unfair. Why not just license them to keep the numbers down? In any event, a recent newspaper report said that very soon Thailand will only have 1,000 elephants, with lots being maimed or killed by landmines near the Burmese border. Whether this low level is true or not, I rather like seeing them waddle around town - reminding us all of days gone by. Anyway, this does remind me of a true story. One of Bangkok's advertising gurus was rushing back to the office in Sukhumvit Road after a heavy lunch. The crowds were thick and somebody was jostling him from the rear. This continued for about four pushes in the back. He spun around in anger with a clenched fist and couldn't stop the punch. The crowds gasped and then parted. There was a well-dressed farang who had just punched a baby elephant on the head. It did take some explaining (and cash) to escape the scene.

A good recent initiative by government is regarding smoking. Now, Pattaya shops cannot display that cigarettes (and other tobacco products) are for sale. This is mainly aimed at stopping teenagers, although I guess that most shops will still sell to them. Although a small measure, it is a step in the right direction. Probably of more help to those who smoke and want to stop are new drugs that reduce the nicotine craving. No doubt the tobacco companies have been trying to stop such medical advances. Anyway, drugs are now available here in Pattaya and quite a few have reported good results and have managed to quit. One of these drugs is called Kuomem and is made by the mammoth Glaxosmithkline group. Apparently 2000 Baht gets a week's supply. Some have managed to stop in this period. Lucky people.

For those who don't know, Pattaya seems to have more charity events per capita than anywhere else. Just about every week sees a large golf tournament aimed at helping those less privileged. We also have many more charity events such as the Jesters' Fair, charity dinners and charity sales. In addition, there are numerous service clubs such as Rotary and Lions that continually support the poor. Apart from these worthwhile works, we seem to have some sort of major festival or event most months such as the recent Vegetarian Festival. Many more events are staged here such as music and food festivals, travel forums and suchlike. So, there is always lots going on - apart from the endless nightlife in party town and reading about what the city fathers have been up (or not, as is often the case).