

Slime and Punishment

Betty McLain

An arduous experience is often the most memorable.

Smitty and I are hanging over the wooden basket designed for one small Thai. Our backs and knuckles ache as we squeeze the rails. The mammoth hairy elephant under us does a nimble tango straight up the waterfall. The four-hour ride is a feature of our trek to become one with the primitive hill tribes of northern Thailand. For six days we sleep in various huts, help winnow rice, wash in rivers, boat down the river separating Thailand from Burma.

For me it is an "Outward Bound" experience that I am determined to complete. I am the slowest of our group of eight. Our guide, Ecksid, moves swiftly through the jungle on thonged, sure feet. He spots a cobra in our path and beats him to death. Smitty is the victim of leech bites. I struggle through the 20-mile, eight-hour walking day up 1,000-foot elevation, then 1,000 feet down, carrying a borrowed, World War II rucksack that digs into my shoulders.

For five nights I do not sleep. I learn about being cold all night—hungry, thirsty, dirty. I listen for the night sounds inside our bamboo hut on stilts; the village opium smokers puffing by candlelight in the adjoining room, the young New Zealand couple making love next to me, the pigs rustling about a human squatting outside near our hut (how I hate these aggressive pigs who cannot wait for our excrement to fall!), the chorus of roosters, animals, villagers pounding their rice at four in the morning. We see the wild marijuana and the Thai-Burmese black market of smuggled teak.

This jungle trek unites us a group with our sensitive peace-loving guide as its head. We come to love him, as well as Shozo, a young Japanese with a serious speech impediment. He enchants the village children with international language: the folded paper crane.

This trek is the most exciting experience of my life, and the entire week, including food, boats, and all, costs less than dinner out back home!

In: *Traveler's Tales Thailand*. James O'Reilly and Larry Habegger, editors. O'Reilly & Associates, 1993. Used with permission.

Seth A. Maislin
Focus Information Services
seth@maislin.com
<http://taxonomist.tripod.com>