

## Spice, Lice and all things nice

Steuart Pennington, CEO of SA - the Good News, blogs about his stopover in Bangkok on route to New Zealand to support the Boks.



As I sit aboard Thai Air flight TG 491 from Bangkok to Auckland with the beautifully attired hostesses offering me "schicken with lice" my journey to New Zealand has started in earnest. To save a few Rands I travelled to Auckland via Bangkok with a 12 hour stopover, bit like walking round a pyramid by climbing over it. Anyway I decided to put the time to good use by travelling in from the **new** Bangkok airport (makes O.R. Tambo look provincial) via the new sky train (Gautrain more comfortable) and doing a tour of the King's Palace and the Thai Museum.

Bangkok is a hectic city of 15m people, it is flat out with hawkers, litter and kamikaze tuk-tuk taxi drivers (old Vespa scooters converted to a three-wheeler, a combination of a rickshaw and an oriental hearse) and currently, lots of smelly, stagnant water. Surgical face masks are evident everywhere.

Ninety percent of the population are Buddhists who, as I learned from my Palace guide, devoutly believe in re-incarnation and meditation. Thai's are a gentle people who overwhelm you with a respectful bow with hands clasped and are extremely polite and hospitable. Notwithstanding, our guide Siam ("Tony if you can't pronounce") was most anxious at the aberrant behaviour of the Thai youth "computers, facebook, and fashion only concern, no dubs for lounge people" he lamented.

The big news in Thailand is that a minimum daily wage of 300 Baht has been more or less nationally agreed. This equates to about R80.00 per day or about R1600.00 per month. Thailand is an example of a low wage, high to low productivity economy (SA categorised as high wage low to high productivity economy).

I did stop for a pavement meal, not exactly sure of the ingredients, something with spice and lice, which was delicious, it cost me R12.00.

Thailand, with a population of 68m, (SA 50m), a GDP of US\$313 billion (SA US\$357 billion) and a GDP per capita of US\$ 4992 (SA US\$ 7158) is the 39th most competitive country of the 142 surveyed by the World Economic Forum in 2011. SA is 50th. What is the big difference? When it comes to Health and Primary Education at 83rd (SA 131st), Higher Education and Training at 62nd (SA 73rd) and Labour Market Efficiency at 30th (SA 95th) they are much more competitive than we are, otherwise we compare more favourably.

You may be thinking 'why are we comparing ourselves to Thailand?' As the American First Nation proverb goes "man who doesn't look over back, sometimes doesn't see enemy". Ask Lord Chelmsford and the brave men of Isandlwana – they know.

SA with the 25th biggest population in the world, and the 25th biggest economy (PPP) we should be aspiring to be the 25th most competitive. We are capable of it.

Okay, okay so Thailand doesn't have our history you might argue, the Thai museum tells us that Thailand became a democracy in 1932 when the King voluntarily handed over constitutional power to the people (the King is much revered to this day, much). But prior to that their whole history was a series of debilitating wars with the Burmese and the Cambodians, with the odd battle with the Vietnamese for good measure, mostly off the back of elephants with sabres gritted between their teeth, right up to the 1800's.

Needless to say the only South African news in the Bangkok Times was the 'derision by Tutu of the ANC', quite an extensive report actually, nothing on rugby, but then the Thai's are a small people. But what really caught my eye was the editorial 'Seeing red on Channel 11' which talked of the PM's Office Minister reviewing all news programmes broadcast by Channel 11. "It is believed she intends phasing out all news programmes produced by the private sector because she prefers shorter news bulletins and longer talk shows focussed on the government's policies and work...these represent one step in the governments grand strategy of purging all elements suspected of, or perceived to be supportive of, or closely associated with, the opposition Democratic Party". YIKES.

I was immediately compelled to write to the Editor, Mr. Pattnapong Chantranontwong and urge him to get in touch with our own Right2Know organisers, and our ANC established Protection of Information Services Bill hotline. But then I thought better of it, especially after it took me five minutes to type his name.

"Don't do what we accuse our own President of doing" I reflected," fighting other people's battles, stay focussed on your own democracy and suggest to the leadership of the ANCYL league that they visit a country, more competitive than our own, where only lice, lubber, corn, tin and torlism are the big earners of follen levenue, and where the market economy is encouraged."

Talk to you from Wellington next week.