

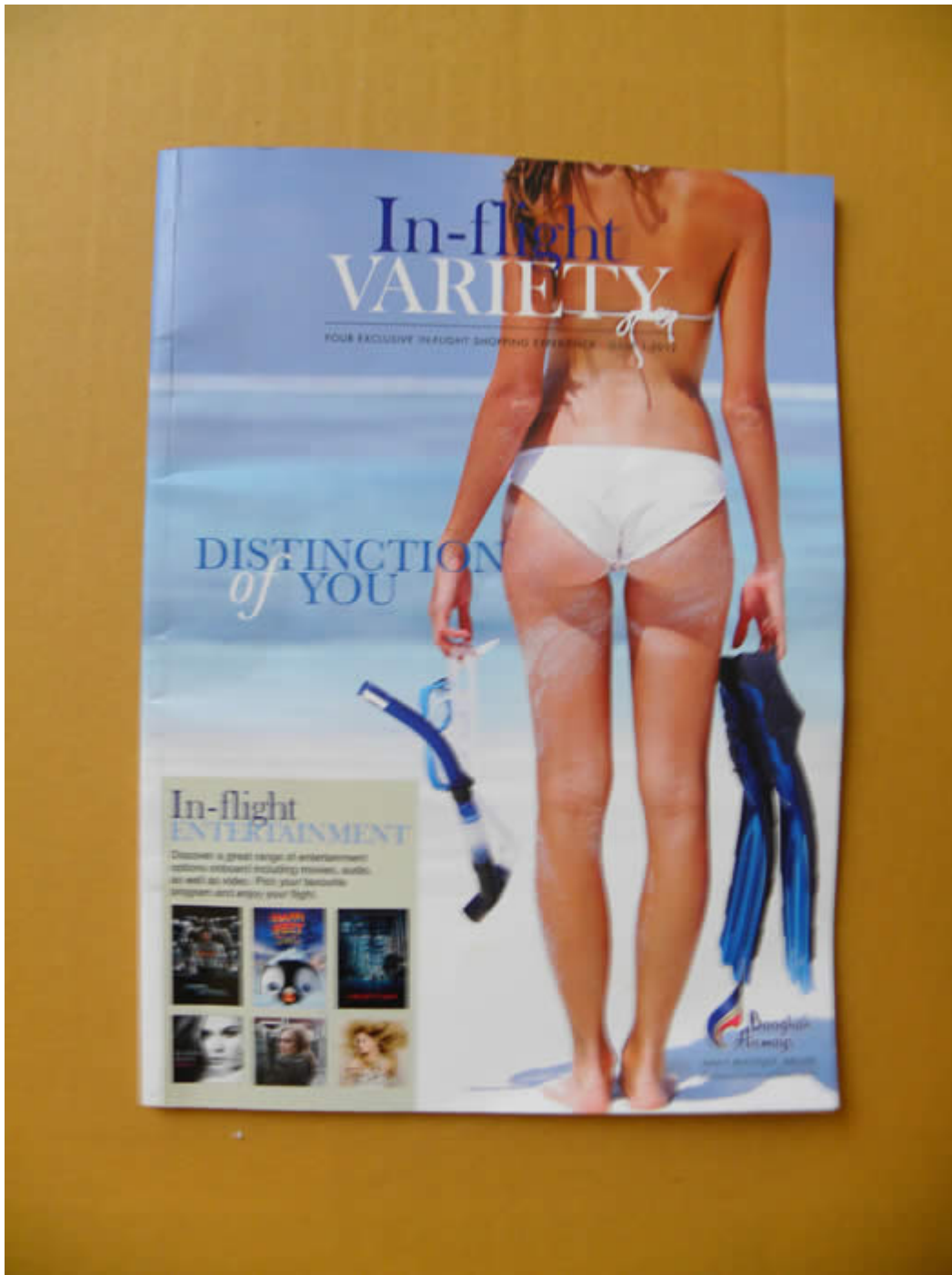
Welcome to the Wangcome Hotel, and Tribal Collecting in Laos



Somehow I have to weave this Chiang Rai, Thailand, hotel into the book I'm working on.... I hear it's popular with newlyweds. If you think this is delicious, check out the name of this massage parlour:



This must be one of them there rub and tug places in Thailand one hears about, with the "happy endings." Whatever - this has to be a classic. (Actually, pervs, it means "golden palace.") (I was disappointed to find out too.) I love these Asian malapropisms, like the sign at the pool in my Chiang Mai hotel: "Must dry before get out of pool." And Dewi Kunti, the heroine in the Indonesian epic the *Mahabarata*.



While on the subject of pervs, I've got a lead on the one messing with my camera in the last Blah Blah, the Kuta Beach one. He's shooting for the cover of Bangkok Airways in-flight mag, *Fah Thai!* I appeared on the cover a dozen years ago but I don't remember this babe being there.



Anyway, enough sexually inexplicit material for now. I'm really here to tell you about my hilltribe collecting expeditions this season. I made two jumps to Chiang Mai in Thailand's north (with Bali in between, to give markets time to recharge) and one to the remote northwest corner of Laos where I rented a bike to get back into the jungled hills. That's a Lantan woman behind me. If it looks chilly, it is at night at elevation and on a bike..



Here's a better shot of the Lantan, who impressed me greatly. Each of the hilltribes has individual dress, customs and language. And they all get along smoothly - unlike most other tribes on the planet. The Igorots of Luzon and other headhunters of Papua and Borneo were always whipping off heads to impress the girls (I mean it); African tribes are still at each other with machetes; and our North American tribes were also big on counting coup and taking scalps from each other. The Southeast Asian hilltribes are unique in that peaceful regard - and it allowed their individual cultures to thrive, particularly artistically.







Vietnam has the most hilltribes with 54 (Vietnam officially states 126-7 but these are sub-groups); Thailand has 7; and Laos has 47. The Hmong are one of the largest and my main focus for 30 years. They impress me so much I made the love interest, Meow, in my adventure-thriller *Opium Dream* one of theirs.



Hilltribes were reported in Chinese writing 5,000 years ago and they began moving down into Southeast Asia in the last 1,000 years. (No, this isn't a Hmong home; theirs are on the ground; but this is the largest grass house I've ever seen - a veritable mansion. It's in NW Laos.)



There's no adolescence among hilltribes. That's a Western luxury, now taken to absurd extremes with dependent children still living at home deep into their thirties. Here, they flow into adulthood smoothly and there's few psychological and dependency problems.



This is a Hmong woman. They have far and away the best embroidery of all the tribes. I purchase most of my textiles and ethnology at markets such as this. Clint Eastwood's *Gran Torino* told their story as immigrants to the US compellingly. They fought with the CIA and spooks like the legendary Tony Po and Jack Shirley against the commies in the Laotian Secret War of the sixties. Tony and Jack, the latter a particularly good friend, were woven into *Opium Dream*.



Although I'm wrapping on 30 years of collecting Hmong, I'm moving into the other tribes. From the French era coins in this gorgeous Akha headress, it's been passed down several generations since the early 20th century. I can't imagine what it would sell for at Sothebys. I didn't disgrace myself by asking if she would sell it - and in any case, I strongly prefer these to stay with the people themselves, keeping the culture alive and vibrant. 99% of hilltribes, I learned in my 4 season Laos survey, no longer wear their tribal dress. Laos has lost so much to globalization.



Enough of this elephant shit. Let's get back to sex. The readers are getting bored. (I was a bit jittery when I shot this picture, while motorbiking along a jungle road. I had a bull elephant charge me in the '80s in a Thai jungle, but I had huge trees to escape behind, and right now I was exposed.)



The first time I trudged, exhausted after a long day's trek, into an Ahka village in 1979 and saw this at the gate, I thought, "What he hell...?" It's to inform the spirits that people live here. They're guardian images. If he looks well endowed....



When Honey Bunch says "Wash the dishes and while you're at it, do the floor" you wash the dishes and while you're at it, do the floor....





I got some damned good collecting in - 200-300 pieces that weigh 120# - as well as writing. These two pictures above are just a fraction. Good thing I was flying biz because I needed every ounce of that 64 kilo allowance. I didn't take Scotch and cigars back this time - a massive sacrifice! Next is the equally massive job of shooting and documenting it all, though it'll be fun too. Then I'll decide which Canadian museum to donate it to.



And what does a collector do after a hard day in the jungle? Why, hang with the guys, of course. Some of the best looking women in Thailand are men. Here at the Chiang Mai Night Market.



Then grab something good to eat. Lao food is something else.



And then it's time to wave bye-bye to another great season in Southeast Asia, which I love. I flew back to Toontown April 11 via Tokyo, completing my third solo around the world. **Upcoming:** I'm leading in June a 14-member canoe brigade including eight Explorers Club members and with famed paleontologists and friends Phil Currie and wife Eva Koppelhus down the Red Deer River, Alberta, canyon and badlands on a sanctioned Explorers Club Flag Expedition. Captain Norm Baker, Thor Heyerdahl's first mate, will be along on his fourth trip with us. Thaz gonna be fun.