

# Escape to the River Kwai

December 9-28, 2013



Ok, after heroically putting up with this white crap for three weeks, I'm outta here!



On the first leg to Calgary I looked down with anticipation on the Red Deer River, its badlands holding the greatest concentration of dinosaur bones in the world. Next June I'll be team leader on my second 18-person expedition down it with paleontologists Phil Currie and wife Eva Koppelhus as field leaders. Explorers Club members are flying in from all over North America and Thailand.



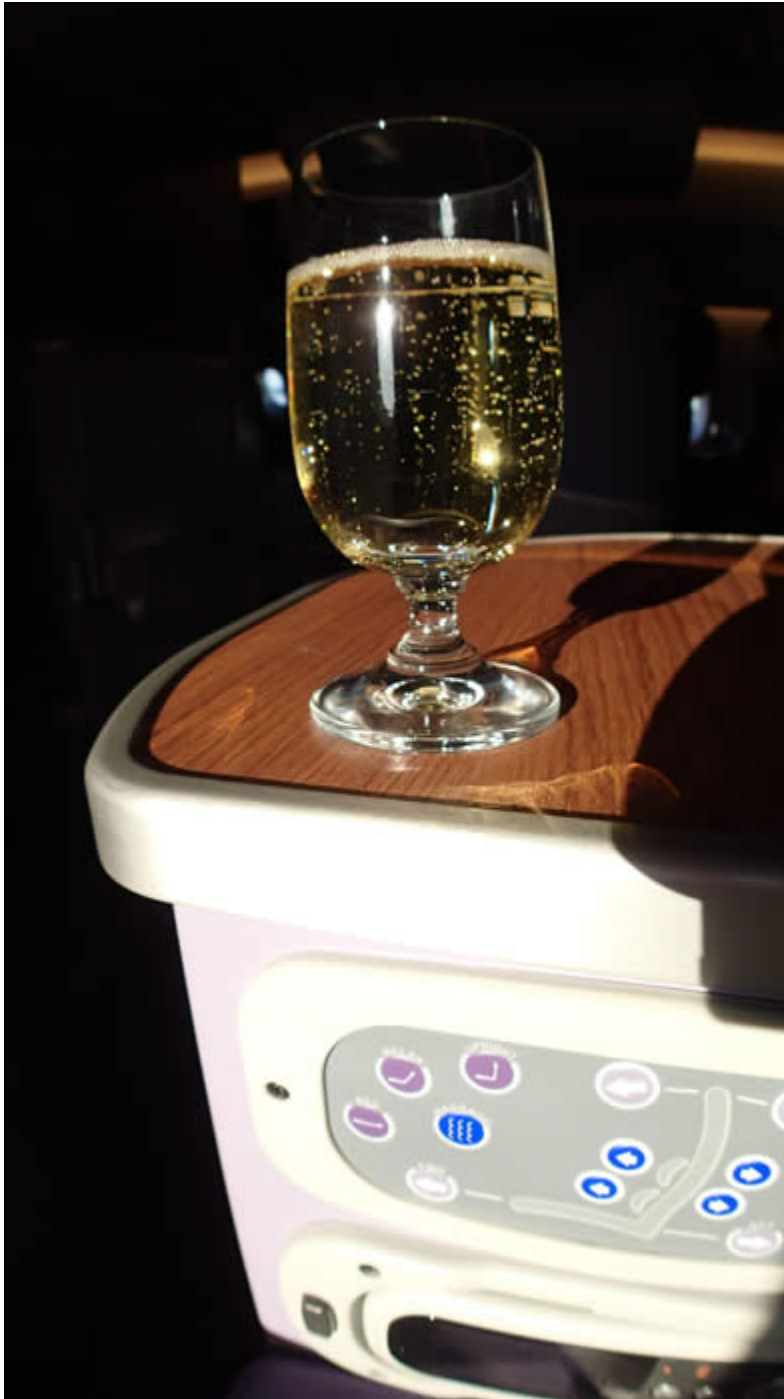
The second leg was to Frankfurt where this huge sign rotated in the airport. I've always been struck by the similarity of Bayer's symbol to the swastika. Little remembered is that Bayer was a major sponsor of medical experiments at Auschwitz. How they survived that association I'll never know. To this day I boycott their products.



There I boarded my first 380, one of Thai Airway's fleet



I thought the first generation pods as in Air Canada's biz section were comfortable. Thai Air's are a step up on their 380s. From the second level, it's like looking down from a four-story building.



Ah, complimentary champagne....



The entire atmosphere instantly changes when you enter a Thai environment, everything becomes softer, gentler in that magic Thai way. My gawd, they even have a massage feature!



After taking off on the final leg to Bangkok, I adjusted my seat for maximum comfort, sipped my champagne, and flipped through the movies. Seeing a Thai one set in Tibet called *Shambhala*, I checked it out, since Tibet is high on my list before the bloody Chinese destroy it completely. I was hardly into it when I was startled to see Ananda Everingham, left, stick his face into the screen.



Ananda's the Brad Pitt of Thailand and the son of John Everingham. John's Southeast Asia's top photographer and he and Jade are close friends of ours. The four of us collaborated on a shoot and story on Sri Lanka's Devil Dancers about 15 years ago targeted at *National Geographic*. The movie was a serious one and damned good and I wasn't surprised that Ananda's won virtually all of Thailand's top acting awards. The lad's got talent.

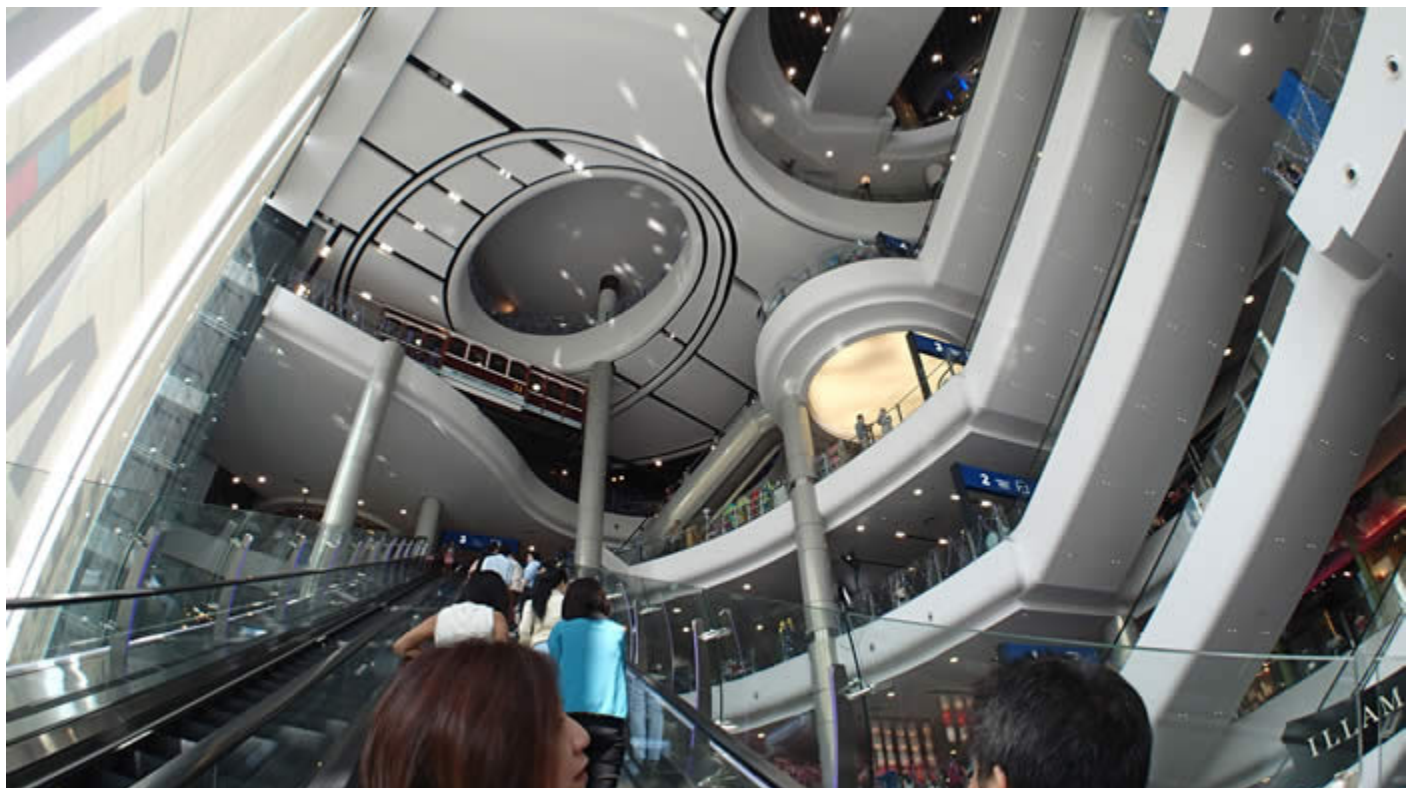




John's latest career move is worth noting. Over several years and using his incredible talent as a photog he developed [www.thebeachfrontclub.com](http://www.thebeachfrontclub.com) . Want to be sure the hotel you're booking anywhere in the world is right on the beach, as advertised (and often fibbed)? Check it in detail on his site which covers 7,500 hotels in over 100 countries that are right on the beach period. And you can book right on the site too, of course. It's a monumental website. This is Thailand's Railay Beach BTW, for my money the most beautiful in the world and I've bummed 'em all.



Landing in The Big Mango, as we call Bangkok, I checked out my old neighbourhood, greeting and being greeted by long familiar street vendors.



Bangkok's come a loooong way since I first landed from Rangoon into this then-grubby city in the late '70s. Then, there was no visible middle class. Now, it's everywhere and incredible shopping centers like Terminal21 seen here are going up. Just a few Skytrain stops down is the Paragon Shopping Center, the most frequently photo posted on Instagram.



There's even great food here, like these pickled duck tongues. And only \$6.00.



Thai cuisine is justifiably world famous and never tastes even close to it outside of the country. Don't laugh. She's into her second edition.



Health care has come a long way too. Why, there's drop in clinics all over the city.



Friendly people. Especially the girls.



Great shopping for your favorite endangered species. (To be fair, croc is farmed here.)



And a nightlife second to none, that I don't care about anymore as I'm invariably in bed by 9:30 every night. The Uzi-going-off-in-bar-scene in *Hangover II* was shot in the Tilac (means "darling") on the left, here on Cowboy Soi.

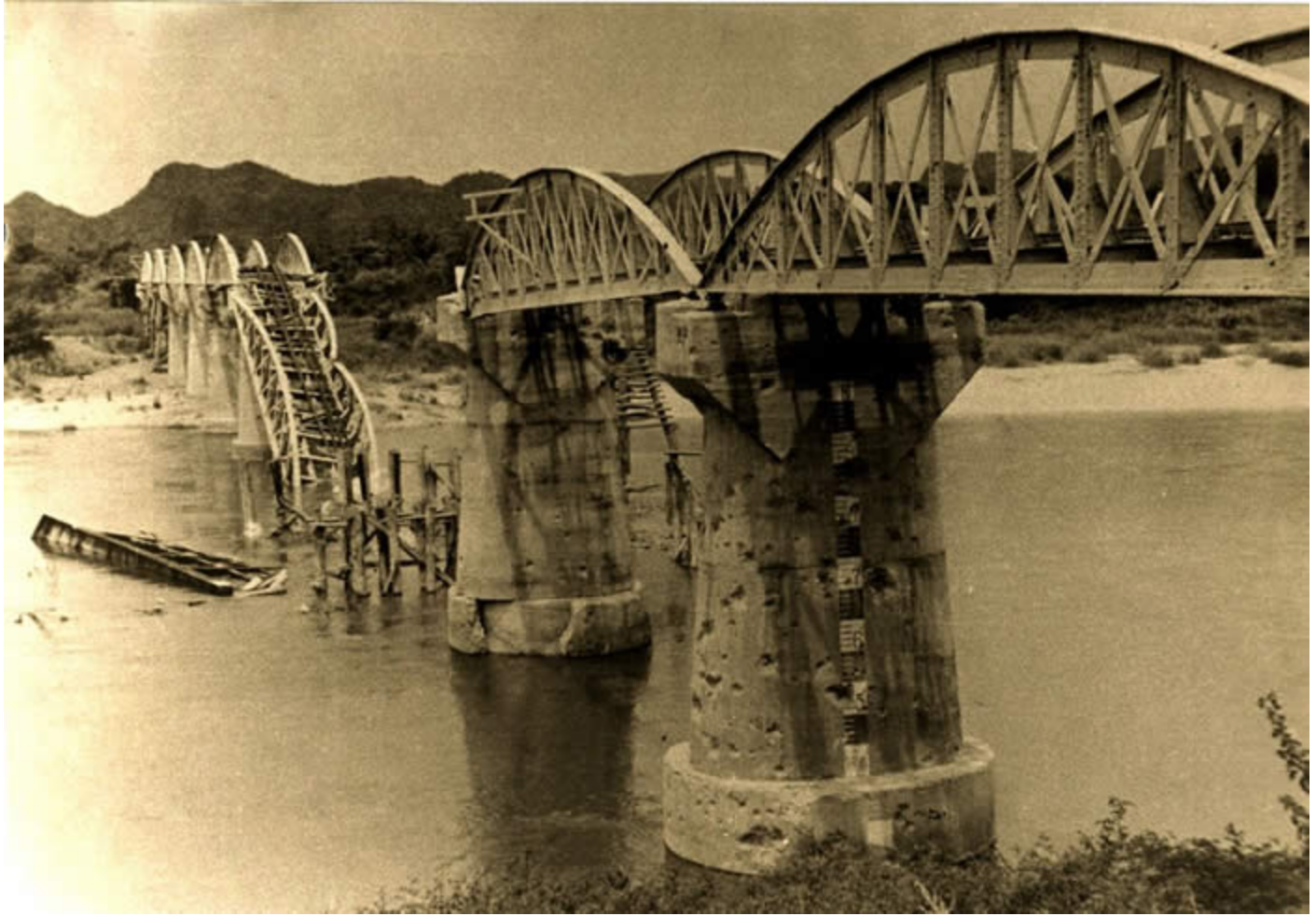


Got together with friends at Cabbages and Condoms. Next to me is Mike Wiss, bridge expert and author of *How NOT to Play Bridge - The Bridge Seminars of Professor Gaston Gitane-Gauloise*. And Jerry Hopkins, author of over 30 books including *No One Here Gets Out Alive* about Jim Morrison that Oliver Stone used for *The Doors*. Jerry also authored *Bangkok Babylon: The Real-Life Exploits of Bangkok's Legendary Expatriats are often Stranger than Fiction* in which he generously included a chapter about me called "The Collector."





Jerry kindly saved me copies of a great two-page review on *Opium Dream* which appeared in *Bangkok Metro* while I was away. It not only mentioned that most of my books are available on Amazon's Kindle for less than \$3 but included a tribute I always take pride in and which invariably appears in my reviews: *Opium Dream* is "an action-packed adventure novel that makes use of true archaeological, anthropological, historical and geographical facts."



After a week to de-jetlag, I grabbed a mini-bus for the 2.5 hour drive southwest to Kanchanaburi and the bridge over the River Kwai, here at war's end damaged from RAF B-24 bombing.



Same view today with the missing two curved spans replaced by rectangular ones - and the shrapnel gouges patched.



On the far bank of the river I found something new to me - two shrapnel gouges that weren't patched, providing a peek inside the cement quality. For someone who has been studying the Death Railway for 30 years like I have, it added a smidgen to my knowledge.



I don't care for stiff, cookie-cutter 5-star hotels and have always had a warm spot for guesthouses and the Jolly Frog is one of my longtime favorites. This has always been a great place to cool out and I need it. After 10 years of helping squire the Canadian Chapter of The Explorers Club from a moribund chapter of 46 to its present vibrant 215 - I sponsored 15 worthy members in the last year alone - I recently stepped down as communications director. That Canada is a powerhouse in exploration worldwide is best exemplified by the last three recipients of the Club's highest honour, the Explorers Medal: Jim Cameron, Phil Currie and Wade Davis.



Just two days later HQ at the Clubhouse in New York offered me a worldwide ambassadorship. I was greatly honoured but after weighing it for a week, I respectfully declined. After 500 weekly 2000-word updates and 39 consecutive contributions to the quarterly *Explorers Log* (our international newsletter), a Club record by far, I need a healthy break to rest and recharge. They well understood.



And the Jolly Frog is the place for me to string my trusty hammock and do just that. That two-three days a week for a decade devoted to the Club feeds prominently, if indirectly, into my next book. I'm still in the research phase, though I have it roughly blocked out and have laid down over 16,000 words, but now I can devote more writing time exclusively to it, once the well refills. I won't say more other than that it's another non-fiction, these Blah Blahs are integral to it, and I still need a few more research years to fill it out. It builds on *Adventurous Dreams*, *Adventurous Lives*, a book that is going to be a very hard act to follow, but I'm sure going to try. That's been described several times as an "important" book and I hope this one to be a worthy successor.



Would you believe that the cost of a clean, neat room - and that's the door to the private bath on the right - costs less than \$7? Prices in Thailand are still incredible.





Food prices in the restaurant have gone through the roof though. For several years the steamed whole tilapia, one of my favorite dishes, was \$3. Now it's skyrocketed to \$4. The cooks here are incredible though the "alleged service" takes a few years to get used to, he laughs.



Helping me shake off the West is my favorite little massage parlour, a delightful and tasteful little place. An hour's massage? 150 baht, \$5.00. And Thai massage is an ancient art, unlike whatever is practiced by those hairy brutes in Istanbul.



But even before I get too settled in my first visit is to pay my respects at the POW cemetery. Indeed, I go virtually everyday day. It never fails to move me to the core.



12,227 POWs and 100,000 Asian coolies died in the 16 months it took to build the 250 miles of railway from Thailand to Burma. That's an appalling average of 250 a day. There's a reason it's called the Death Railway.



*"Always thinking of you Fred. I will be with you soon. Love, Den X"*

5033199 SERJEANT  
J. A. JOLLEY  
THE CAMBRIDGESHIRE B  
7TH JUNE 1943 AGE

THOUGHTS YOU ARE WITH



In our thoughts  
you are with us  
still we will meet  
again at God's  
will

Sergeant John Arthur Jolley

08 11/12 - June 7 1943



   
2359637 SIGNALMAN  
**J. THOMPSON**  
ROYAL SIGNALS  
6TH AUGUST 1943 AGE 22  
THOUGH ABSENT YOU ARE ALWAYS NEAR.  
STILL LOVED, STILL MISSED, AND EVER DEAR

Signalman  
Jack Thompson  
Died 1943  
God Bless  
  
R.I.P.  
Elsie  
Thompson  
Died 2006  
*Brother &  
Sister  
Together again*







My second stop was to the incredible monument Sir Rod Beattie built in memory of all those men lying across the road.

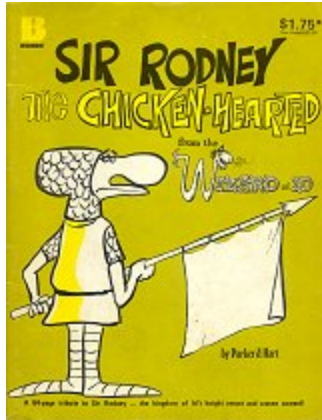




That's Sir Rod in the middle, just back from London where Prince Charles presented him with an MBE to add to his Australia Medal, the knighthood from the Dutch Queen and the fellowship in The Explorers Club I sponsored him for. He has so much silver hanging from him he clanks when he walks, but then he should, as he is a knight after all. On the left is Andrew Snow, the Centre's outstanding researcher.



While Sir Rod gets (and deserves) the accolades, it's Andrew who is in many ways the backbone of the Research Centre. It's he who meticulously assembles the massive - MASSIVE - and always growing data base on each and every person who served on the railway. He showed me an email request he received from a POW relative who had little more than a regiment number. It took Andrew - whose uncle, and father slaved on the railway (and who survived the war only to die a few years later) - 3.5 hours to assemble the deceased POW's story: from capture in Singapore and imprisonment in Changi Prison, trained up to the railway, following completion, trained back to Singapore, put aboard a ship bound for Saigon but turned back when the harbour was blockaded by US subs, to his eventual death. The fulsome email he received in return is his reward. Andrew deserves a medal or two too.

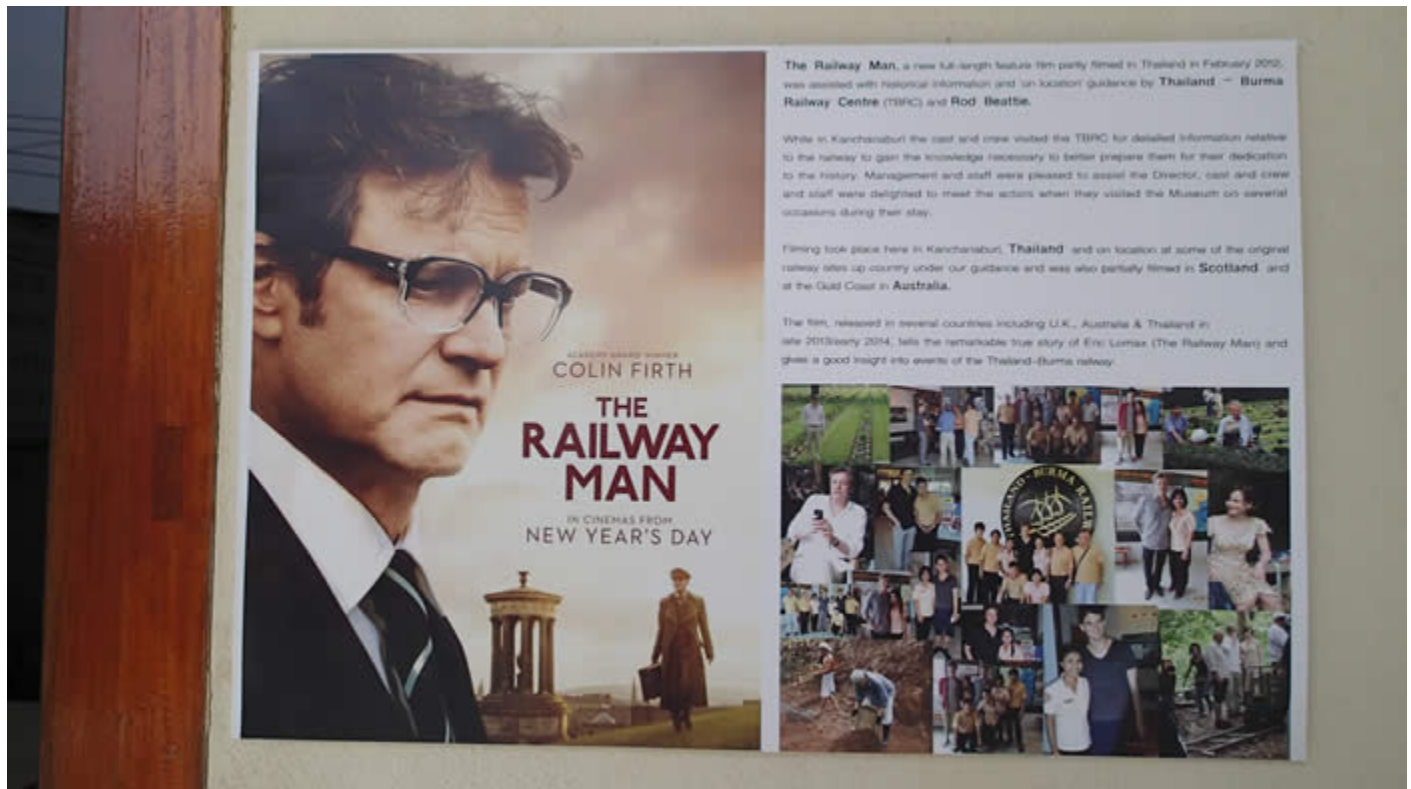


Sir Rod will be with us on the Red Deer dino expedition next June. As you know, everyone gets an appropriate river name and he felt his - Sir Rodney - was too formal. I pointed out that, not to worry, this is the Sir Rodney we picture. Being an Aussi with a typical no hold's barred Aussi sense of humour, he had to laugh. We had important biz to conduct: lay down dates in the New Year when The Dragon Lady has arrived so we can commence excavations on the Death Cave, continuing the Stone Age digs we've been doing together the last three years in caves he discovered while doing his monumental railway research.



In the last cave we excavated, at the site of the Hintok POW camp where it was used as a garbage pit, came many of the hundreds of objects in the museum. Below the POW level he discovered Neolithic tools, and thus began his continued digs, to which Madame Su and I joined.

Hintok is now the site of an upscale resort which pays homage to the original purpose and we'll get an update on the mini-museum we're building there in cooperation with the owner.



So I'll be heading back to The Big Mango to meet up with The Dragon Lady and spend New Years with friends. And looking forward to the imminent release of *The Railway Man* which Sir Rod acted as technical advisor on, and another close friend, Kiwi Kevin Chisnall, handled the special effects for. If you see steam issuing out of strange places on a locomotive, blame him. Colin's shooting for an Oscar on this one, incidentally. Based closely on a true story, it's head on, gut level drama and I expect it to make a big splash.



And I always like to leave on a happy note - and what's happier than a coupla kids? Especially at Christmas. Even if these cuties are Thai and ain't never heard of it. Oh, several friends say they live vicariously through me. Next blah blah I'll show you the friend I live vicariously through.... In the meantime, M'ey Cistmas as the Thais say!