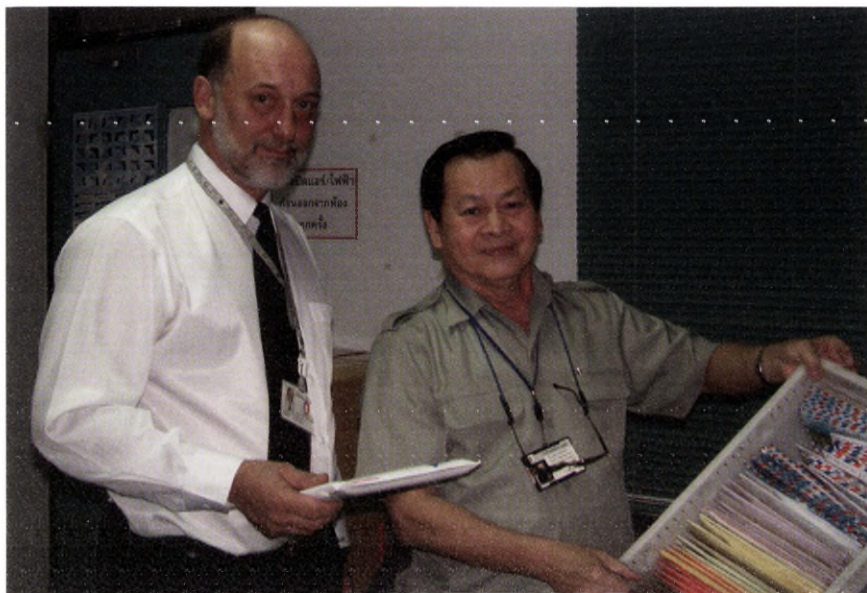


Thailand land of smiles

By Bob Martin, Senior Australian
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I have been in Thailand for almost 2½ years - and my time to return to Australia is rapidly approaching. My wife and I have thoroughly enjoyed our time here and will leave with some sadness - particularly leaving friends we have made in the Thai community.

Thailand is often referred to as "the land of smiles" and that has certainly been our experience.

I have had the chance to see much of Thailand and to meet many of the 6000 or more Royal Thai Customs officers. While the dichotomy of facilitation versus border control is often a common discussion point, Thai Customs faces many scenarios not found in Australia. Land borders, for example, such as the borders between Thailand and Myanmar, pose problems for Customs that are beyond our experience.

Friends I have made within the

ranks of Thai Customs will be sadly missed. It has been those people who have made our stay in their country so worthwhile.

In particular, some officers of the Narcotics Suppression Sub Division have become close work associates and even closer friends. In a work sense, they have been responsible for identifying a number of matters that have been of considerable benefit to Australian Customs corporate objectives. As friends, they have introduced my family and me to a new range of cultural experiences that will never be forgotten. And I know we have introduced them to different experiences - in one case, a once in a lifetime chance to dine on fine Australian roast lamb.

A memorable occasion was an invitation for my wife and me to attend a family gathering at a national park for a weekend to observe the phenomenon of meteor showers. Lying flat on our

backs in the outdoors, covered with blankets (it does get cold in the mountains) at 2am watching this wondrous sight while competing vocally with our Thai friends as to how many sightings we had made was an unforgettable experience.

A more recent experience began some months ago when my Thai Customs friends started a fundraising project for a small village some 250km north of Bangkok. I was asked to become involved and did so readily. The project's intention was to raise funds to renovate the village temple and to help the many young village children.

The Narcotics Suppression Sub Division Officers raised a considerable amount of money and gathered a substantial quantity of gifts for the children. The gifts ranged from toys to more practical items such as clothing and school stationery items. My efforts consisted merely of donating some funds and buying (on advice from a Thai Customs officer friend) a quantity of blankets for use by the village residents.

The efforts of the project team were much appreciated by the villagers. My wife and I and one colleague were privileged to be the only non-Thais invited to attend this special Saturday.

It would be fair to say however, that the blankets were more appreciated by the elderly women of the village than by the children.

My wife and I plan to have further involvement with this village in the future. Our current plans include working with my Thai Customs friends to install some concrete flooring for the local school.



A young boy who has received his gifts is attempting to "wai" (honour) the donors. The "wai" is done by clasping the hands together, in a position similar to praying, and simultaneously bowing. The lower you bow, the more you honour the recipient. But as the young boy shows, getting the "wai" performed correctly when you have your arms full can be a bit of a struggle.