

Farmsteading

a rake and a hoe can be found in an organic garden or in a bar



padding Mae Kok river on raft made from re-cycled plastic bottles

in Thailand

a bunch of true happenings — written by Ken Albertsen

If you follow the newspapers, you can be forgiven for thinking Thailand is stuck in a revolving carousel of economic woes, natural calamities, political unrest, greedy power-brokers and celebrities searching for the best skin whitener.

In contrast, this illustrated text gives a glimpse of what goes on with non-celebrities such as illegal immigrant families from countries bordering Thailand – their struggles, as well as their mini-triumphs and what keeps them humming from day to day.

Ken is an avid letter-to-the-editor writer (over 500 published in Bangkok's two English-language dailies) and author of the novel 'Lali's Passage' and the learn-Thai primer titled; '600 Thai Words Taken From English.'

'Farmsteading in Thailand' chronicles the eight years of challenges in developing a homestead in northernmost Thailand – starting out with no connections, no handle on the language, and little seed money.



"I started reading it today. While eating my fresh fruit for breakfast I almost choked to death on a watermelon seed. The part about you going down the river with the inflatable kayak with the suitcase sticking out got me laughing. I can just picture what was going on in the local Thais mind while you floated by. I wish I could have seen that."

Charlie Gallery, Bangkok

"Ken - wow what a truly fascinating book. I just gave it a quick skim, and plan to take a look in more detail. Is this a book that will be in Thai bookstores? If not, it should be. Its so much better than some of the other books one sees in there - most of which seems to be focused just on BKK nightlife!"

Rembert Meyer-Rochow, Attorney, Intel Semiconductor, HK

"This is all interesting to me, as I have some of the farm bug in me and I love avocados also." Dan Berman, Editor in Florida

***actual,
unaltered
comments***

"I recently bought and read your Farmsteading book, which I enjoyed very much." Robert Sinnott, California

"Hi Ken, finished reading it today. I enjoyed reading it, I particularly like to read of other peoples endeavors in LOS [Land of Smiles]. Overall very humorous and interesting. I'm passing it on to my friends, hope you don't mind."

Sam in Phuket

"Just finished reading your book - thoroughly enjoyed it. You have and are continuing to lead a very interesting life. The part where you held off the undercover special police - is it true?! Amazing stuff."

G.Pfeiffer, farmer near Nong Khai, NE Thailand

Farmsteading in Thailand

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Two photos dating from 1998 while exploring the southern isthmus of Thailand, before opting to settle in Chiang Rai. Above, is a 'spirit house' at a northern stretch of Ko Pang Ngan – an island, which sits north of Samui. Though it's about the same size as Samui, it is refreshingly less developed. I was chilling out here for several days while my Thai girlfriend, Da, was heating things up at the 'Full Moon Party' at the SE corner of the island. Needless to say, we weren't a match destined to stay together. The following photo is a typical fishing boat off the Andaman coast.



One reason the windows are made small – is to make the ship appear larger from a distance – and perhaps a less vulnerable target for pirates. Right after this shot was taken, the crew guy turned his back, bent over, and proceeded to 'moon' the small boat load of farang in my boat – mostly young women. Cheap thrills can come in odd packages and when least expected. Another couple of construction examples where

windows are made smaller: In desertified parts of the Moslem world, Mali and Yemen in particular, some older style buildings are built with windows made smaller – the higher up the wall they're located. The Potala in Tibet, once the largest buildings in the world, employs a similar window design, including exterior walls which slant slightly inward. Together, those designing tricks produce a visual effect that makes the buildings appear taller and more imposing – especially when viewed from afar.

1. SMUGGLING

At Kew botanical garden near London, there's a tree-sized palm growing out of a large clay tub. A bold sign bills it as 'world's oldest pot plant.' A Yankee reading that might picture the world's oldest marijuana plant.

Some plants just aren't well suited to being restrained in pots – preferring instead to stretch their roots out in deep soil. In 1998 I brought an avocado pit to Thailand from California – it nearly got me in trouble.

As my luggage was going through the Stateside airport security check, the brown billiard-sized ball prompted the guard to draw me aside. He might have thought it was a ball of heroin or maybe an explosive, he didn't say, but after a couple minutes of scrutiny he let me and my pit pass on down the hallway to the plane – and that was pre-9/11.

Upon arrival in Bangkok, the avo pit slipped past customs inspectors with nary a raised eyebrow (from the inspectors, not the pit). Next day it was set to start germinating. Avocados originate from the Americas, and though there are various types, there are two basic families. The pit I started with was a Haas-type – which produce small to medium sized, strong flavored fruits. Their rinds are greenish-black to all black, and they're decent keepers when ripe. The other general type of avocado is the 'Fuerte' type ('strong' in Spanish) which are larger, and have thin greenish rinds and large pits.

Avocados are rarely seen in Thailand, but can be found in the markets of their direct neighbor, Burma. There, you'll find the Fuerte types of various qualities. Burmese farmers there seem to keep all types in production, rather

than culling the inferior types in order to focus on the better ones. Some Fuerte types grown in Burma harbor inferior traits such as; uneven ripening, and large seed to fruit ratio. That's probably because the farmers don't graft their trees but instead simply grow from seed – without seeming to care whether the seed came from a good quality fruit or not. Besides its food value, avocado oil is a sought after commodity that's used in soaps, lotions and other specialty products.

Like that sole avocado pit, I came to Southeast Asia with little fanfare. My arrival differed from Tiger Woods' homecoming in that no one knew me, and the Thai government wasn't rolling out any red carpets nor offering me honorary citizenship. Rather than being skilled at hitting little white balls in to holes, I had some skill at farming. That first pit has since been followed by dozens of others, along with seeds and cuttings of other plants which are not familiar in Thailand. The idea is to propagate useful fruits and nuts that could be introduced to the Thai marketplace.

Eventually, the best producing plants will be made available to locals in this region who express an interest in growing them. People who can afford to purchase, may do so – which would help in keeping the program going. On the other hand, those who are low on funds could get plants for free. Some hill tribe people might fall within that category.

From the large town of Chiang Rai in northernmost Thailand, there are verdant hills which roll out to the nearby borders with Burma and Laos. By the way, who put the 's' on 'Laos'? Southeast Asians refer to it as Lao, and that sounds better than a word that sounds like the singular version of 'lice.' Anyhow, speckled throughout this region are hill tribe villages. Basic lifestyles there have changed little until recent years. Now, all but the most remote

villages have mobile phones, TV antennae, and fashion magazines. Yet even the trappings of modernity can't obscure the cultural roots of the people. Some of the clan names are: Lahu, Muser, Akha, Lisu, Lao, Meo, and Karen.



hill tribe gal with baby at village by Mae Kok river 45 Km west of Chiang Rai

Historians tell us many of the hill tribe ancestors migrated down from the steppes of Tibet. To play the migration card even further, it can be argued that some Native Americans also claim their distant ancestors came from the Tibetan plateau. Indeed, there are strikingly similar appearances between contemporary hill tribe people and depictions of native Americans, north and south.

Though there must be some studies on the subject that I haven't seen, there are also intriguing similarities between the colors and patterns of contemporary hill tribe weavings, compared to weavings of present-day indigenous Americans. It may also be interesting to note that Tibetans and Hopi Indians of the southwestern U.S. are two of the very few cultures worldwide -

that use colored sand paintings – and each has similar words for ‘firebird’ (Palulukon).

The present day fate of the hill tribe people is a mixed bag. Though most of the younger generation leave their villages by their late teens, there’s still a stalwart minority who stay and make a go of living off the land. Old habits die hard, and slash and burn is still common – though slowly giving way to farming methods which are more conducive to fixed settlements – and less prone to erosion. Until recently, opium was the crop of choice. American administrations put pressure on Thailand and Burma to stop growing opium – and the campaign has worked rather well on the Thai side of the border. Now ginger and vegetables more commonly hug the hillsides.

Here and there, new crops are being introduced. Macadamia, coffee, mandarin orange and black tea are a few that come to mind – and each show varying degrees of viability as income generators. As with such endeavors, there are myriad factors that come in to play, such as growing conditions, climate, salability of the goods, plus the alacrity and skill of the people involved. The idea of introducing higher value crops is not unique in concept. Some of the fruit and nut varieties I plan to offer may also prove to be useful alternatives to existing crops.

Every year Thai newspapers feature articles about price supports for farmers. These subsidies are supposed to be paid back to the State, and wind up putting farmers further in debt. Latest findings say if all goes well (good yields, good prices, willingness to repay debts, etc), the average farmer can pull himself out of debt in four years. In Thailand, price supports are commonly used to prop up rice, rubber, and various types of fruits - the list goes on.

Put simply, the best case scenario would be if farmers grew crops that were in demand and therefore yielded decent prices. Instead, too many farmers wind up growing crops that are simply not popular with consumers (jackfruit, for example). Another pitfall is growing too much of certain crops and then expecting government to pick up the tab when prices dip below expectations.

Because plant nurseries didn't have the type of stock I was interested in, I chose to bring over avocado and pink grapefruit seed from overseas. A single grapefruit from a San Francisco grocery store got me started with a mere four seeds. Each sprouted – thus yielding a 100% germination rate – though one has since shown vulnerability to leaf blight, so it was uprooted and thrown away. It brings to mind the influential crop breeder; Luther Burbank, who lived and worked in Santa Rosa California around the 1940's. The story goes that when he experimented with hundreds of plum trees grown from seed, he would only keep the one or two that had the best all-around qualities including top quality fruit. All the others were tossed in the trash bin, even if they were quite good.

I'm told that grapefruit grow 'true to seed,' meaning the fruit they come from is pretty much the type of fruit they'll yield when mature. In contrast, most commercial fruits are like apples, whose seeds yield all manner of odd-sized and weird tasting fruit. More recent info, however, indicates that grapefruit derived from a melding of Asian pomelo and Barbados sweet orange, so I won't be surprised if fruit from seed-grown plants yield some surprises later on. As I write this, it's been just six years since the four seeds sprouted, and the three remaining trees are still about another four years from yielding fruit.

Each year, my workers and I endeavor to propagate additional trees. There are several methods we use. Fortunately, citrus responds well to rooting methods, so we've had success with two basic methods; 1. branch cuttings

placed in soil, and 2. rooting branches still on the tree by wrapping a section in special soil and a plastic covering. We've also had some success with grafting, but more about propagating in later chapters.



Riding elephants by the Mae Kok. It's possible to 'adopt' one of these pachyderms – though they're not cheap. Feeding is allowed (favorite fare; sugar cane and bananas – they must have a sweet tooth), though be cautious. I was once knocked down by one of the big mamas. Apparently she was jealous of how I was doling out more bananas to her mates than I was to her. She gave me a solid shove with her trunk and BAM! I was down in the sand in an instant. Glad she didn't follow up with a foot to my chest – would have left me crestfallen.