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 Where Did Time Go: My Experience Abroad

After 23 hours of speculating what I would see, landing wasn’t only exciting, but greatly appreciated. My legs felt like Jell-O, my eyes were as heavy as bricks and my head felt more swollen than usually, walking off the plane was a joy. I reached customs, hoping someone could understand English well enough so that I could make it to baggage claim as quickly as possible. I made it to baggage claim, and waited, waited some more, then a little more, it was clear; I was now operating on ‘Thai time’. It began to hit me; stepping out of the airport onto the hot tarmac, I was clearly in an unfamiliar world. The smell, the look, the feel of the city was all novel, yet it already felt like home. On the drive to my guesthouse, the cities personality was visible. The streets were buzzing with scooters, swarming with people and excitedly dense; this place was unlike any I have lived in before. Curiously enough, Chiang Mai was oddly familiar in many aspects when compared to my short travels in Mexico. This unfamiliarity was oddly familiar.

Before departing to the ‘land of smiles’, I was most preoccupied with school. Thus, I felt underprepared for my adventures in Thailand. Not until I woke up from an uncomfortable nap in an airplane full of people who seemed much more comfortable in their seat than I, did I some what grasp where I was headed. This slight realization was trivial, I quickly fell right back asleep. Realizing a couple of hours before you actually touch down into a whole new world is typically not a good sign, but exciting nonetheless and nerve wrecking. Having little travel experience, I was anxious to get off on the right foot. I was worried I would have trouble communicating. I was worried about unknowingly offending the local culture. I was worried about my job as an intern at the office. I was worried about being so worried. Upon arrival, all the anxiety soon disappeared; something told me I was exactly where I needed to be.

Elephant Nature Park is an exciting organization. I am extremely pleased to have the opportunity to offer my services to their righteous cause. One of my favorite aspects about the job is how much the staff enjoys doing their work. Ever staff member seem content with their position. Perhaps it is Thai nature, custom or culture, but whatever it is, it is refreshing to see. I always find myself asking for more work here at Elephant Nature Park, hence the late replies to e-mails. My workload is never a burden and no matter how much I got to do, it always feels manageable. Much of my work revolves around informing prospective/present volunteers about the park. Every Monday I head to the park to do Orientation/Safety protocol for the new volunteers. Hear I discuss park rules and help adjust the new volunteers to their weeklong home stay. On Tuesday’s I often head up (or stay overnight at the park) to help Surin project manager, Alex Godfrey, inform and recruited individuals for the new Surin project.

I also work answering e-mails on the foundation’s web mailroom. Here, I inform individuals and answer any questions they may have about the projects endorsed by Elephant Nature Foundation. I also interviewed prospective staff, as well as take them around the park to get a final verdict on whether I believe they would be a good fit for the park. I also worked on a Volunteer’s Quick Guide used by the park discussing greeting, clothing, safety and socializing at the park.

The work is has been great so far and has exceeded my expectations. I am constantly gaining knowledge as to how a success conservation organization operates. I am building connections and meeting many individuals who are just as concerned about conservation as I am. Here, I do not feel so disconnected from my field of work; I feel I could make a difference.

Not so long ago I felt like I was telling people I had just arrived in town and that I had ‘three months left’ in Thailand. After settling in, my time interning for ENF has flown by. Tasks are piling and responsibilities are growing, yet my work is improving and getting done quicker. My work at the office has helped me understand what is required in order to run a success conservation organization abroad. I am building connections with individuals who are clearly making a difference in animal welfare, and perhaps I will be lucky enough to work with these individuals later in my career. Learning from these individuals has been very important towards my professional and individual growth. During the next half of my internship, I plan to further my ties with individuals leading the charge in animal welfare, on top of completing all of the work I need to do in the office.

Things are going well relative to my personal goals. I came here and sought to discover how a successful conservation organization operates and is maintained. When you got as many caring individuals working together as ENF has, the job of maintaining such a respected organization is a lot easier.

I have made progress in many aspects both personally and professionally. Personally I feel much more confident in my ability to go to a foreign environment and adapt to a new environment. I still have a lot of room to improve my communication skills, as well as believe in my own personal abilities. I want to address this flaws during the second half of my internship at ENF.

Cross culturally, I believe I have adapted quite well. Thailand has not been the culture shock I was expecting to encounter. Part of this is due to the great job my colleagues at ENF have done easing me in to the position, but I also realized I have adapted to my surroundings soundly.

Many experience have stood out to me during my time at ENF and Thailand. I have embraced all Thai customs, understand and respect their beliefs and definitely enjoy the cuisine. I have tried many dishes many of my friends and even some colleagues are impressed by, including chicken blood, worms and grasshoppers. Before I leave, I want to ensure I have left my mark in ENF. I want develop long lasting friendships and building connects for future work, I believe I am well on my way to doing this.

It is difficult to explain a day in my shoes here in Thailand. Everyday seems to be unique in some way or another, but I do have a loose routine. I wake up, take my much needed morning shower (really hot at night), throw in the occasional shave, get dressed and then I’m off to work. Work typically starts around 10am, but I am often there much earlier. Upon arriving to work, I get to my desk, turn on my computer and then I check my e-mails. I then look at my schedule to see what I want and need to get done for the day. Whether working on projects at the office or at the park, the hours seem to fly by quickly. Around 5pm, I go with a fellow office colleague to go play soccer at Wat Phra Singh, a local Buddhist temple. After this, I return to the office to speak to Lek about any on going projects or jobs she would like me to do.

My live situation is not bad given the only time I spend in my room is when I go home for bed. If I could change or request anything it would be to get AC instead of a fan, it gets awfully hot at night. I would also advise interns to buy a small refrigerator to store food in their room. When you get the midnight munchies, its good to just be able to open you refrigerator and have a quick bite.

Luckily, I did not need a refrigerator to store food because purchasing street food in Thailand is very cheap. On average, I spend less than 100 a day, most of the time spending much less than that. Recreation is not pricey, as long as you budget responsibly. I try to spend under 1,000 baht a week If I could do anything different from this aspect it would have been to withdrawal large sums of money to minimize currency conversion cost. I would also advise future interns to embrace the Thai culture, as it is vibrant and charming. Coming from a Mexican background, I understood how important culture was to the average Thai person. I also believe it is important for future interns to understand this.

Travel and transportation cost have also been minimal as well. I rarely use any type of transportation as I usually walk to my destination or ask a friend for a ride, but riding a tuk-tuk is not bad as long as you bargain. Though travel and transportation are cheap in comparison to what I am typically accustom to, but paying for a tuk-tuk for a 10-15 minutes walk could add up quickly.

My coursework as a Zoology student at OSU educated me on the physiology, biology, behavior and ecology of animals, but not much on the conservation of wildlife worldwide. My coursework provided even less insight on possible solutions to resolve conservation problems, or even clarify what these problems where in the first place. My time here at ENF has allowed me to view and experience these problems first hand. Countless times I have seen street-begging walk down Chiang Mai streets and how unknowing foreigners fuel this illegal trade. The most important thing my coursework has provided me with is generally understanding of all things biology, something many conservationist are not equipped with.

One thing I misunderstood was the correct usage of “the wai”. When I first arrived to Thailand I was “waiing” everyone, regardless of age. Initially, I did not realize that it was disrespectful to “wai” someone younger than myself before they “waied” me first. I finally understood why the first question I got asked every time meeting someone new, “How old you are?” It is still a bit difficult to gauge how old an individual is at first glance (Thai’s look unbelievably young for their age), but I make sure to ask and then “wai” accordingly.

As for myself, I am much more confident in my ability to adapt to new situations. I find myself being much more assertive and succinct, I approach my work with increased poise and clarity. During my time at ENF, I have realized what areas I am gifted at and what areas I need to work on. I tend to have the ability to connect with people. I realize that I have the ability to be a great leader, but I am at times tentative with decision-making, something great leaders do not struggle with.

I have also realized how important Elephant Nature Foundation is for the conservation of the Asian elephant. Organizations like ENF are inspiring in an otherwise depressing and bleak line of work. I have discovered how influential education is for animal welfare. As long as individuals are clueless of the world around them, these problems will continue and never be resolved. I will aim to resolve these problems when its my time to step up to the plate.