

GAMEFOWL IN THAILAND, LAOS AND CAMBODIA



Mekong river, landing-stage of Laos.
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The 17th of May 2010 started very bad, as Schiphol Airport was closed due to the problems with the Iceland ash cloud. But happy for us our KLM flight of 20.45 was still on. The flight was pleasant and after arrival in Bangkok due to the political demonstrations we were immediately redirected to the city of Chiang Mai in the north of Thailand. Lucky for us as we already visited Bangkok before.

These extra days came out handy as I had planned a visit to the Cockfighting & Exhibition Center outside the city. The owner Mr.Chai has setup a very nice little complex. All exhibit material is dedicated to the history and culture of Thai cockfighting sport. Yes, I say 'sport' as this is a part of Thai life and culture. Just like the famous Thai boxing or '*Muay Thai*'. Cockfighting has been part of Thai life for many centuries. Just like in other Asian countries.

Mr.Chai gave me a personal tour. In a very clear way he explained to me all aspects of Thai cockfighting, including training, handling, conditioning and feeding. Through live demonstrations he showed me how the gamecocks were massaged with a hot cloth, the skin being rubbed in with turmeric paste to make the skin like leather, and gymnastic exercise to keep the birds fit as a fiddle.



Feeding was done with small pieces of dried banana dipped into honey. The highlight were sparring sessions between gamecocks from Thai and Burma (Mynanmar) as well as crosses between these two gamefowl breeds.

Left: Willem at the entrance of the Cockfighting Learning & Exhibition Centre in Chiang Mai (Thailand).

Right: The demonstration pit of the cockfight exhibition centre.



Above: The inner court of the cockfight centre. Right: A Thai gamecock gets a hot massage.



In Thailand the fighting is mainly done with natural spurs. Sometimes birds are fought in artificial spurs. The best locations to find Thai gamefowl are outside in the country. In the city you can find some as well but it is more difficult to locate them. Take a small photo album with you showing gamefowl and cockfighting. Then for example every taxi or tuk-tuk driver knows what you are looking for.

In Thailand the majority of gamefowl belongs to the so-called Malayoid-type. The Thai birds are locally known as 'Gaichon' and the Burmese birds as 'Pama' both with weights upto maximum of 4 Kg (8.8 Lbs). You also see some Bankiva-types but these are mainly used for crossing to improve speed, agility and accuracy.



Above: A Thai gamecock with a beard. Very rare!



On day 3 we encountered an evening clock from 08.00 to 06.00 hours imposed by the Thai government. Damn, our planned visit to the Thai box stadium was going up in smoke. So we were happy to leave for Laos at day 5. Leaving from Chiang Khong, a Thai border town, we crossed the mighty Mekong river to Houay Xai by boat. Here we got our Laotian visas and were dropped on a 50 meter long Mekong slowboat. During the coming 2 days we would travel by boat to Luang Prabang, the second biggest city in Laos.

During our river trip we would make some excursions to villages and sites along the river.

Despite the fact that Laos is a neighbouring country of

Thailand, the country differs in geography and culture. Regarding chickens, you see a diversity of types running around. Gamefowl are known as 'Teekai'.

Above: A Bankiva-type gamecock.

Right: A traditional spirit house to keep away the bad spirits; a must in every Thai home!



We saw gamefowl, regular fowl and crosses between these two groups. We even saw naked-neck gamefowl!

Like most Asian people the Laotians keep their fowl outside. They are not kept in pens. Due to the existing hierarchy not much harm is done and if clashes occur, the losers can hide and run. The top fighting birds are kept under for Asia so traditional bamboo wicker beehives. Note: the birds are not always kept under these cages. Some walk in bigger coops. But all birds are daily exercised and cared off by the owner. Am not kidding; every bird gets a personal touch. So don't get traumatized by the life of a gamecock as the layers and broilers kept in our countries live in far worse conditions!



In Laos the birds are fought in natural spurs. Yes, this fighting is a hard game too, but it is non-lethal. Gamefowl fought in super sharp artificial pen knives or metal double edged metal spurs in countries like Mexico, Peru, Philippines or Bali in Indonesia, get killed or heavy injured in a couple of minutes. Many times even the winner is seriously wounded! That's why cockfights with shortened and/or blunted spurs are much more humane. (What is humane these days ?) Sometimes the natural spurs are covered with linen or another type of tape. This is the animal variety of human boxing.

Left: A Champa cock.

Below: A Champa hen with chicks.

Now back to our trip. In Laos you will see a variety of fowl in the most exiting colours and patterns, although that is not that important, as in Asia birds are selected on gameness and vitality.

As most people cannot write or read, they make more or less use of a virtual breeding standard. These criteria are transmitted from father to son over generations. So these people know exactly what to look for.

This also includes the proper shape, type and typical (breed) features. Only the fittest survive and this guarantees incredible vitality.

Another interesting thing is that many Asian gamefowl breeders really believe





in scale-reading ! Yep, they study the colour, the patterns and sizes of the scales on the shanks. Masters of this skill can read out the quality of a bird. As this is done for ages and ages it must have some value.

Left: Scale reading by the Mr. Chai.

During my trip all local people welcomed me and they exchanged experiences with great interest. Through my local travel guide you get a deep look inside the character of these gamefowl breeders.

Making photos was no problem at all. Many showed their biggest smile posing with their gamecock beside me.



Above left: A proud Laotian gamefowl breeder with his bird.



Above right: Willem with a Laotian gamecock.

Experiences on the spot and in the field sometimes reveal more information than books. I am always stunned to see how these local breeders with a minimum of gear and money manage to produce topclass birds.

I also saw some pigeons being kept but I don't know what sort of birds; rollers, tippers, highflyers ?

In the next page you see a photo compilation of Laos Poultry.



Clockwise, from above right: Laotian Naked-neck gamecock; Laotian gamefowl hen with chicks; Ducks from Laos near the Mekong river; Laotian Bankiva gamecock and a Laotian gamefowl hen.



Above: A pigeon loft in a Laotian village near the Mekong river.
Right: A Laotian pigeon.



The last week we planned to stay in Cambodia. We arrived in Phnom Penh, the capital city. Next day we visited the so-called "S-21" prison. This was the slaughterhouse and torture center of the Red Khmer regime (1975 to 1979) led by mass murderer Pol Pot. If you walk through the buildings your stomach turns around. Then we went to the killing fields outside the city where thousands of people including babies were killed in a most brutal way. How sickening can people be ????

The most impressive building on this site is a high tower with a center of glass with 8000 skulls piled up to the top. To get my head free and to see pleasant things I went outside the site searching for fowl. And yes, I spotted some very interesting gamefowl. These were of Sumatroid-type or in plain English: the most visible feature is their bushy long tail.

Gamefowl is known here as '*Mon Jul*'. These birds are fast and furious and armed with metal spurs. They weigh about 3.5 Kg (7.7 Lbs). I showed old and young Cambodian cockers my photos of the big size so-called 'Kulang Asil' and Shamo-like gamecocks known as 'Cambodians', kept in Europe. They shook their heads and laughed explaining to me that these birds are non-existent in Cambodia. So it seems some guys over here in Europe just wanna make some money with non-existent exotic gamefowl! This myth clearly has been busted.



Above: A typical Cambodian gamecock.

In Cambodia all birds are fought in metal spurs and this differs to the style with natural spurs used in Thailand and Laos. Cockfights are highly illegal. The government is simply against it due the fact that people wreck their family by betting really everything they have, and in the past yes even wife and children. How far you can go with your hobby !

Through some stops we went overland to the city of Siem Reap. This is were the Angkor Wat, the biggest (500 acres) temple complex in the world is located. For many years this site was on our to do list. The Khmer people always have been warlike and this reflected in their cultural life. They were fascinated by violent sports, for example;

wildboar fighting, elephant fighting and cockfighting. By the way, Thai boxing has its origin in the Khmer boxing known as '*Pradal Serey*' going back to the 9th century A.D.



Left: Another Cambodian gamecock.

The local travel guide took me to a wall of the Angkor Thom complex build in the 12th century which was the old Khmer capital. On the wall of a building a famous relief depicting a Khmer cockfight is carved in stone. This was the highlight of the trip when it comes to my hobby, the breeding of Asian gamefowl.



Above and right: At the famous cockfight relief at the Angkor Thom complex. Below, right: My wife Brigitte at an Angkor Wat temple, a location that was used to shoot the movie "Lara Croft-Tomb Raider".

Below: Koh Thonsay Beach.

Despite travelling to Asian countries for nearly 13 years I am still fascinated by Asian culture and life. Asia is a colourful mix of history and culture which always will have my interest !

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