

## JUST AFEW FEET AWAY FROM THE KING OF THAILAND

The royal summer residence, Klaikangwon Palace sits close to the centre of Hua Hin and as I slowly drove by yesterday was already ringed with yellow, the colour for Monday the day of his birth; billowing flags, softly draped fabric around the entire perimeter of palace walls, stately pictures, gold framed and much larger than life, all homage to a king who has become much more than a king, a figure of universal statesman hood.



King Bhumibol Adulyadej has had a long life and all devoted Thai's wish nothing more for him on December 5<sup>th</sup> than an even longer life. Thailand's peacemaker over decades of his rule, this much revered King is the common rallying figure for a deeply polarized population over the past few years. If there is a word that has more meaning, evokes more outpouring than LOVE, then it surely must be used to describe the feelings that ordinary Thais have for King Bhumibol. They fear for a world that is void of his patriarchal

presence, as indeed do most foreigners who have made Thailand their home.

I was told I was lucky to have come so close to the king 14 years ago after having dinner with my good friend at a hotel in Hua Hin. And yes, I did feel extraordinarily fortunate. Few foreigners actually get to see King Bhumibol Adulyadej and fewer still come within feet of him. We were staying in the nearby city of Cha-am and making good progress back there when my friend suddenly became very excited. "I think the King must be coming," she said to a bewildered me. It was close to eleven at night, relatively quiet with no sign whatsoever of the imminent arrival of a monarch. We pulled over to the side of the road, my friend peering inside a fruit and vegetable store at the small group of people assembled there. Her excitement grew as she described the store as being part of the Kings Project, quality, organically grown fruit and vegetables at artificially low prices offered to his subjects with mutual love and caring. She identified a music friend of the King in the small throng and one or two other dignitaries. There was something about to happen and possibly quite soon.

My friend observed that she was wearing a skirt and I was not. "I'm very sorry, but you can't come with me in case the King comes, you're wearing trousers." I accepted my fate, trousers were not respectful attire for a woman when in the presence of Thai royalty so while she entered the store, greeting those within with the traditional Thai wai, I stood quietly beneath a large Rain tree in full view of the store but yet a comfortable distance away my companions at this time only three or four, waiting like me, in silence.

Typical of the level of his care and consideration for the rank and file, I learned the King typically travels at night. He does so deliberately so as not to disrupt the flow of traffic and seriously inconvenience people. His meetings are then, largely scheduled at night and movement is almost at an hour most people are asleep.

Two cars pulled up and parked a short distance from the store. A small, cavalcade of police outriders on motorbikes had flanked the humble sedans and they remained astride their vehicles as the King emerged from the driver's side of the car. He was not alone and not being familiar with Thai nobility I had no idea who his companion was but a second car parked alongside were likely a security detail. All dressed casually in civilian clothes, including the King it was clear



there was no formal motive in mind for this visit. No Mercedes or BMW, no Lexus or Rolls Royce, no entourage of officialdom just an inconspicuous pair of sedans of a brand that easily went unnoticed under the street lights of Hua Hin.

The King made his way directly to the store and I noticed that my two or three companions had grown to a dozen or more with small children among them. They arrived as quietly as they now stood, in reverence, heads bowed hands held together in front of downcast eyes as if in prayer. Even the children instinctively knew to calm themselves and stood quite still on the spot, wide eyed, mouths agape. How could they not feel the intensity of my excitement? How was it possible to stand restrained and composed with the King of Thailand walking right past you? Such constraint, such composure are hallmarks of Thai culture; a culture that refrains from demonstrating strong emotions when in public. It is regarded as a sign of strength to maintain composure, to display control of emotions when others around you may yield to theirs. I very much admired this cultural trait but regrettably miserably failed in attempts to emulate it.

The King could just be seen greeting his great musical friend but was often out of view as he made his way from person to person inside the store. I saw my friend give something that looked like a slight curtsy, lowering her body so that her height was kept well below his in his presence. Her wai was deeply respectful eyes averting his gaze. Onlookers gathering about me kept their respectful pose and if a dozen or more people had joined us, we were not aware when or how that happened.

My enduring memory of the short walk he took to his car, before he opened the driver's side and made himself comfortable behind the wheel, was the remarkable reaction of my fellow royal watchers. King Bhumibol made a slight detour to acknowledge those who had waited about me. With his head imperturbably bowed, serenely poised, without a smile and very few words somehow his presence alone conveyed the mutual respect in which he held my companions. His warmth and compassion like silent sentinels always by his side.

Not a word was uttered, not a single sound near or far; the breeze in that moment if indeed there was one made no impression on a solitary branch or leaf... soundless, total and complete silence. No cheering crowds, no horn blowing, no whistles, no 'long live the King', not the merest hint of a whisper! I had only ever experienced such stillness, such intense quiet under the dome of a mighty cathedral in the presence of prayer filled faithful. This was outdoors not out of earshot of cars and heavy trucks moving betwixt and between cities but like me, nobody heard a thing.

This was a single man, borne to rule of stature much, much taller than his actual size. A King who humbly passed a single quiet moment of greeting with his people whose deep and undeniable reverence froze sound for what seemed a very long time but of course couldn't have been.



The moment passed and as he drove into the stream of traffic, outriders in tow, I realized I hadn't breathed in quite a long time. I had absorbed the atmosphere but in my stillness had registered every tiny detail and now wanted to happily and noisily chat to my neighbours about what we had just shared together...we'd seen the King, we had been close enough to reach out and touch him! Extraordinary good fortune! But that was not to be; as serenely and quietly as the throng had gathered, so they dispersed and I guessed that this was the way it had possibly always been?

King Bhumibol and Queen Sirikit live now in their summer palace in Hua Hin, a special honour for the people of Prachuapkirikhan. His birthday this year will be marked by many ceremonies and events in celebration of his rule and in homage to the care, love and complete dedication he has extended to the people of

Thailand. But I will forever remember an unassuming bespectacled man, a man despite his regal moniker drove himself about in the middle of the night in a modest sedan to avoid bringing discomfort to his people. An unpretentious, remarkable man, a powerful figure made powerful through his many good deeds and not through forceful endeavours. Happy Birthday and long may he live.

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