Inside Thailand, the land of the white elephant

Kuwait Times was pleased to participate in the ‘Muslim Media Familiarization Trip to Thailand 2014’ organized by Thailand’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The week-long trip aimed to promote Thailand’s medical tourism industry, famous beaches, halal food industry and peaceful co-existence between different religious groups and ethnicities. Overall, twenty-two media representatives from Kuwait, Bahrain, Jordan, Oman, Qatar, Turkey and Malaysia too part.

The Etihad Airways flight from Kuwait to Abu Dhabi Airport took approximately one and a half hours and it took six and a half hours to get from Abu Dhabi to Suvarnabhumi International Airport, Bangkok. Luckily we arrived early to Bangkok. We checked in at the Vie Hotel where we were warmly welcomed and greeted by ‘Wai’, Thailand’s traditional form of greeting. ‘Wai’ is a prayer-like gesture with the palms pressed together accompanied with a little head nodding and a slight bow. While you are in Thailand ‘Wai’ will become an everyday habit when greeting people. Vie Hotel is a chic hotel, conveniently located in the heart of the city, with spacious rooms and suites, and very close to shopping malls. The hotel serves halal food for its Muslim’s guests.

History of Thailand
Located in the centre of Southeast Asia, The Kingdom of Thailand is at the heart of the region. Looking at a map of Thailand reveals a country whose borders roughly form the shape of an elephant’s head. Thai civilization dates back thousands of years, although the modern era of Thai history began with the founding of the Kingdom of Sukhthai.

The country’s population is estimated at about 65 million of which four million people are Muslim. Thailand’s dominant religion is Theravada Buddhism, which plays a fundamental role in Thai identity and culture. Islam is practiced primarily in the country’s southern most provinces where the population is generally Malay, most of whom are Sunni Muslims with Christians presenting 0.7 % of the population.

Thailand’s climate is generally marked by three seasons, the monsoon, the summer, and a cool winter, though the climate is pleasant year round. Thailand’s currency is the baht. The official language is Thai. However considering the large number of tourists visiting the country each year, English is widely spoken.

Ministry of Foreign Affairs
The trip kicked off early in the morning at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs where we received a briefing by the Department of South Asian, Middle East and African Affairs and the Department of European Affairs. First Secretary Jak Sangchai started by warmly welcoming each and every journalist that represent his or her country.

He began his speech by highlighting the important economic ties between Thailand and the Middle East. "Thailand imports70 or 80% of its oil from the Middle East. Mostly from UAE but also from Oman, Kuwait, Qatar and Bahrain. As we export halal food to East Asia such as Malaysia because we are not an Islamic country. We also import agriculture products to the Middle East."

Sangchai stressed that the relationship is based on respect, understanding and exchange of culture and efforts made to preserve peace in the region,

“We have a lot of Thai people that work in the Middle East. They have a source of income to Thailand and around 1000 student studying there. Most of the students that study in the Middle East come from the south of Thailand, where most of their studies is Islamic studies."

“People are willing to work in the Middle East and we are looking forward for the world cup in Qatar. We are considered to be subcontractors but we are looking to be contractors in the future,” he said.

“There are 2000 people working in the construction sector in Bahrain and more in the UAE and 500 in Qatar airways, we want to promote Thai beauty, it is important to promote tourism. People come here for treatment and that is also a positive thing that brings income to Thailand,” he continued.

As for the relationship between Thailand and Kuwait, Sangchai explained that while, generally cordial, there is significant room for further strengthening ties through the initiative of both countries’ heads of state.

Regarding the political and humanitarian situation in Gaza and about what happened a few months ago in the south of Thailand, he said to Kuwait Times, "We issue a statement that we condemn the violence in Gaza, which is the noble way to say it. We are happy with the truce but it’s not seemed to stop. We have to wait and see. The Palestinian issue cannot be resolved in one day. We are ready to keep the relationship and willing to send financial contribution to Iraq and Gaza”.

"Statically the people in the south are poorer than the north, that’s why we need to help them. The issue about the south is that some people are trying to make it a religious issue, it is not a religious issue its more social and economic issue," he continued.

At the end of our visit, we received a memorial from the Deputy Permanent Secretary of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

Halal food industry
Thailand is one of the world’s largest and most advanced producers and exporters of food products. Its deep-rooted agricultural tradition and abundance of natural resources, combined with significant investment in technology and food safety research and development, have helped make it the “Kitchen to the World.” It is considered one of the first countries in Asia to apply scientific techniques to the halal quality assurance process.

Halal food restaurants are widespread in Thailand and in order to guarantee the safety of the products, the Halal Science Center and the Muslim Studies Center located in Chulalongkorn University, Bangkok were established. The Halal Science Center is an instructional center and has a network of laboratories dedicated to maintaining the standards of halal food products. It opened in 2003 and received an award in 2006 for best innovation in halal industry from the Halal Journal.

After touring the center we were briefed by Sulida Wangchi, assistant director at the Halal Science Center, about the purpose of the center. “In this center we analyze food for any contaminants that is not compatible with the ‘Shariaa’ law of Islam and conducts research into new methods of food preparation and new reagents for detecting such contaminants. Also we provide information and training to the public and to the food service industry related to the preparation of food in accordance with Islamic law,” Wangchi said.
Wangchi explained the importance of halal food for the body, citing evidence about how recent experiments show that slaughtering livestock according to Islamic law benefits human health. “Nowadays even the West is consuming halal food because they know it is the healthy way to eat,” she emphasized.

“There is no doubt that we can uplift jobs for Muslims if we spread awareness and the importance of making halal food. It is a chain, from raw material to product, to logistic to the consumer,” she said. Wangchi concluded by stressing on the importance of checking the product that is being imported to the country and never eating anything that is not labeled with halal signs.

We were also introduced to CP Food Company (Charoen Pokphand Foods Public Company Limited) which is considered to be Thailand’s largest agribusiness firm. After an interesting tour of the factory, we met with Sithong Vatcharangkulipapat, vice president of CPF. He briefed us about the company and answered several questions. He told Kuwait Times that the company used to export frozen chicken griller to Kuwait back in 2004, but due to the bird flu they stopped. They resumed exporting last year.

Samui Island
We then departed Bangkok and headed to Samui Island. The flight from Bangkok to Samui Island took approximately one and a half hours. When you arrive there, it is like arriving to heaven on earth. All you can see are the green hills, the open sky and coconut trees. We checked in at Anantara Lawana Resort where we were welcomed with their customary warm hospitality, smiling faces and a complimentary neck massage. Nestled on the quiet, pristine northern end of Chaweng Beach, Anantara Lawana Resort lies steps away from the ocean. The interior is inspired by the island’s original Chinese merchant settlers and when you enter your room, you will be welcomed by an elephant crafted from towels placed on the bed and a plate of exotic fruits.

You cannot visit Samui Island without discovering its night life. We headed to Chaweng Beach Street where all the action was going on. The street is lined by souvenir shops on both sides and crowds of tourists mill about, making purchases. The brightly-colored bathing suits and t-shirts strike your eyes. At every few steps, you can find a massage shop with inexpensive offers. After ten or eleven at night when the shops get ready to close, you hear music coming from pubs and restaurants, where people get ready to party. There is nothing more lively and energetic than the nightlife in Samui Island.

In the morning we were briefed by the Southern Border Provinces Administrative Center and the 4th Region Forward Command of the Internal Security Operations Command where we were welcomed as media representatives coming from the Middle East. After a quick overview of Thai history, an official from the Southern Border Provinces Administrative Center spoke about the situation in the South of the country and about press freedom in Thailand. He emphasized the importance of an open society where Buddhists and Muslims respected each other’s religions.

Concerning the southern provinces, he explained that groups that claimed to represent the people did not communicate effectively with the government in raising their demands. In fact, he claimed that many of these groups, particularly those engaged in causing unrest, did not truly represent the local Muslim population in the first place.

He described how Thailand’s economic development is accelerating and the economy is expected to grow by 3.5% this year. In view of this, he concluded by mentioning the importance of an open society where Buddhists and Muslims respected each other’s religions.

Kambon Marik Village or the Islamic Village
Kambon Marik Village or the Islamic Village is about 30 minutes away from the Anantara Lawana Resort. The population is made up of about 300 Sunni Muslims and it is considered to be the smallest Islamic community on Samui Island. The inhabitants originally came from Patani Island. The village has one mosque—called Nour Al-Ihsan Mosque—one clinic, and two schools one of which is a religious school located beside the mosque. The villagers speak Malay in addition to Thai.

Another local said that the government helped her build the house she lives in with her family and she couldn’t ask for more. Their dreams and demands make sure to try the Kanom-frarang-kudeejeen desert, a Thai-Portuguese cupcake baked according to a 500-year old recipe.

Kambon Marik Village is a fishing village and around 900 houses are found all around it. Villagers survive by drying, salting and selling the fish for tourists most of whom are Muslim and Malaysian.

Although the village is extremely beautiful, full of trees and on the coast, it is extremely poor and far from civilization or modern life. The houses are made from wood, cement and zinc roofs and are rather glued to each other. “The government doesn’t give us aids so we usually collect money from each other to help each other”, Noria, a 29 year old local, told Kuwait Times.

Noria said that the government helped her build the house she lives in with her family and stated that the government also helped her build a clinic which she couldn’t ask for more. Their dreams and demands are very small. Noria did ask if the government could help her with better education for children.

Bumrungrad International Hospital
The days we spent on Samui Island were magical but we had to go back to Bangkok. Thailand is considered an important hub to medical tourism. So our visit would not have been complete without visiting the Bumrungrad International Hospital, considered to be the best hospital in the world and number one destination for tourists who come from 190 countries across the globe.

In 2013 alone 140,816 patients from the Middle East and 829,333 patients from South East Asia. It is the first hospital to be accredited by the US-based Joint Commission International. The use of advanced medical technology, their highly trained doctors and the special international services-such as offering over 150 interpreters, patient assistance, international insurance coordination, international medical coordinators, visa extension counter and Muslim prayer room-makes Bumrungrad International Hospital a favorite amongst Arab patients.

Kudee Chine Multi-religious Community
Our journey then took us to Kudee Chine Multi-religious Community where you can visit a temple, a church and a mosque all in the same area. When travelling along the Chao Phraya River in Bangkok, you cannot miss Wat Kalayanimit, because of its massive Vihara building (a huge hall housing the temple’s main Buddha images). Built in 1825 by a Chinese nobleman named Chao Phraya Nikon Bodin, the temple was constructed in honor of King Rama III, then the reigning monarch.

Thailand’s multicultural roots can be traced back to the beginning of the Ayutthaya era, when the Thai kingdom welcomed Asian and European traders from powerful countries such as India, China, Japan, Holland, Portugal and England. This also explains the presence of the Santa Cruz Church. The church was established in 1786 and was built by the descendants of early Portuguese traders who had come to the Thai Kingdom during the Ayutthaya period. The church is also known as Wat Kudi Jeen, and with its dome shaped tower and yellow and pink facade, it is a distinctive landmark one should visit. Also established in 1786 and was built by the descendants of early Portuguese traders who had come to the Thai Kingdom during the Ayutthaya period.

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A few steps from the church we see a very unique construction which was originally built with wood and afterwards with cement. There are 1200 Muslims living in the area, mostly Sunnis. According to the Imam’s mosque, there are 4400 mosques across Thailand, 210 of which are in Bangkok. Despite the presence of these diverse religious groups and ethnicities, there is an obvious peace and harmony that connect them.

‘Muay Thai Live: The Legend Lives’
Music, arts and culture shape a country’s identity. Thai Kickboxing is considered an important element of Thai history. Bringing the origins and heroes of Thai Kickboxing back to life, ‘Muay Thai Live: The Legend Lives’ is an epic live show that captures 300 years of Muay Thai’s history through a dazzling combination of hyper-real fights, breathtaking stunts and sweeping drama. The show was created by director Ekachai Uekrongtham. It was presented at The Stage, Bangkok’s new playhouse at the heart of Asiatique The Riverfront, Asia’s largest lifestyle, dining and entertainment complex. The show conjures up Muay Thai’s greatest heroes, from its beginnings to the present day, in a series of tales artfully woven together.

It is a very impressive show and is conceived as family-friendly entertainment that offers a rare mix of thrills and drama enhanced by a lush production which brings the glory of Thailand’s cultural heritage back to life in spectacular fashion.

When our trip came to its inevitable end, each and every one of us was genuinely sad to leave this amazing country. The Thai are a humble, modest and spiritual people and they respect tourists. I will never forget the luxury of finding massage shops everywhere and any time I want. It’s natural beauty, vibrant music of the traditional teks and garlic museum is carved into my memory. Thailand is an amazing place to visit, whether you go with your family, by yourself or as a couple. There is something for everyone and you will never regret visiting this charming country.

By Sahar Moussa

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