

Thailand 2010

by Josh Neilson

On August 2nd 2010, with flights and the Bangkok hotel booked, Lou and I learnt "There is a high risk to your security in Thailand because of ongoing criminal and politically-motivated violence. We advise against all tourist and other non-essential travel. Since 2004 there have been over 4,000 deaths as a result of terrorist and other violent attacks. The Thai Government's Emergency Decree is in force." We were stunned! I searched the internet to learn more.

It seemed clear that away from major cities we would be fine. So, against the government warning, we packed our kayaks. Lou and I, from Auckland met Toni, flying from California, in Bangkok Airport. Tyler, coming from Canada, was expecting to meet us in downtown Bangkok. Driving to our hotel the government's warning was real and my eyes were peeled for trouble. But all seemed to be in order and our taxi driver, delivering us at midnight, said, "It's very safe. You'll struggle to find a problem."

In the morning we searched for a vehicle, shopped for essentials and



Lou Urwin & Tyler Fox
taking a local taxi elephant
Photo Josh Neilson

got stuck into the amazing food. Tyler joined us in the evening, but without his gear. While waiting for it to turn up, we sorted out our car.

Unlike 2007 when we had taken the overnight train to Chiang Mai to find a car, this time we drove and looked for rivers along the way.

Our first stop was Khao Yai National Park which I knew, from a few years of online searching of the best destinations, had great whitewater. The problem was, we were not welcome! Tourists flock to the waterfalls and over the years some have hurt themselves jumping into the waterfalls' pool. The authorities do all they can to stop this and of course kayaking the waterfalls is no exception.

Walking away from a clean 15 metre waterfall with perfect flow was a bad start!

Moving slowly North toward Chiang Mai, we ticked off some sweet new drops and rivers. This type of kayaking can be frustrating! Some days we'd drive for 12 hours, finding nothing and thinking it would have been easier, with more kayaking, to have stayed on the Kaituna. The crew gets a bit edgy, but this makes everyone more determined, plans are adapted and you find something new with thoughts of home and mainstream kayak destinations forgotten.

We paddled a bunch of first descents and also repeated some of the runs we paddled in 2007.

After some time in Chiang Mai we loaded the car and travelled North West. We were on the road for 12 hours and barely saw a flowing river.

Tired and ready for bed we found a nice hostel in the village of Mae Chaem. While waiting for our dinner we heard the welcome sound of rain on the tin roof. It continued throughout the night.

We woke early, anticipating what we might find in the nearby Doi Intanon National Park, home of the clean 15 metre Mae Pan Waterfall. We drove to the base of the falls where water flow was still on the low side, but good to go.

One by one we hauled our kayaks up the rock face to the top. Tyler and Toni went first while Lou and I filmed and ran safety. After good lines run by Tyler and Toni, Lou and I climbed to the top. It was steep and slippery. Spray from the 100m waterfall pounded our faces.

I went first and in a hard hit lost my mounted waterproof camera. It's in the river forever. Next Lou had a sweet line into the pool. Further drops were entertaining and all good. Then Lou and I had the next few days in bed with food poisoning, while Tyler and Toni took on more runs.

Exploring in exotic countries away from regular tourist paths involves local culture. It's always a marvellous paddling experience. On one occasion the map suggested a waterfall on a small river with a bit of water. Looking for it, but distracted by Black Forest Cobras, we walked for a while and reached the top of a hill. With the river still undiscovered, we gave up on the mission and turned back.

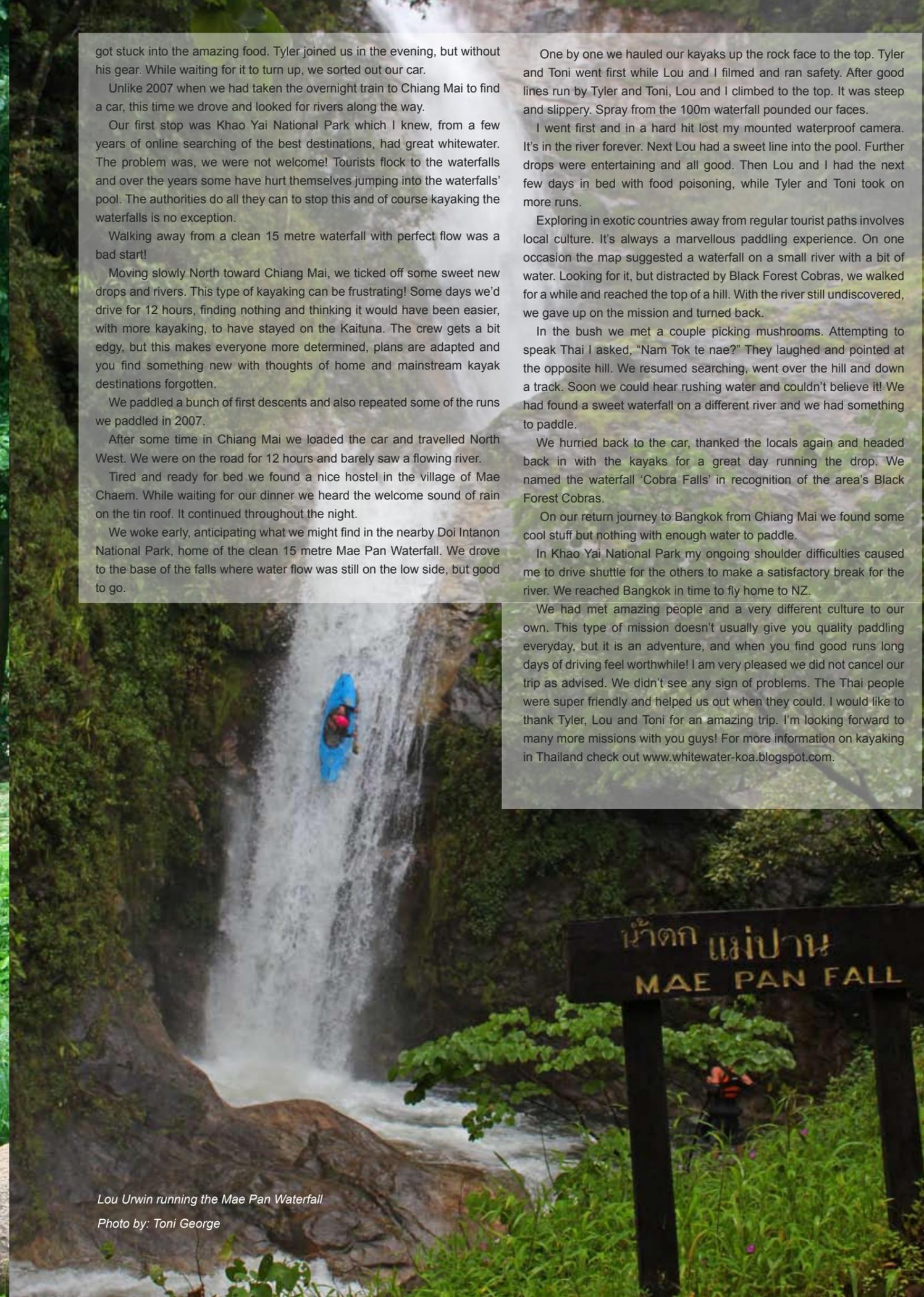
In the bush we met a couple picking mushrooms. Attempting to speak Thai I asked, "Nam Tok te nae?" They laughed and pointed at the opposite hill. We resumed searching, went over the hill and down a track. Soon we could hear rushing water and couldn't believe it! We had found a sweet waterfall on a different river and we had something to paddle.

We hurried back to the car, thanked the locals again and headed back in with the kayaks for a great day running the drop. We named the waterfall 'Cobra Falls' in recognition of the area's Black Forest Cobras.

On our return journey to Bangkok from Chiang Mai we found some cool stuff but nothing with enough water to paddle.

In Khao Yai National Park my ongoing shoulder difficulties caused me to drive shuttle for the others to make a satisfactory break for the river. We reached Bangkok in time to fly home to NZ.

We had met amazing people and a very different culture to our own. This type of mission doesn't usually give you quality paddling everyday, but it is an adventure, and when you find good runs long days of driving feel worthwhile! I am very pleased we did not cancel our trip as advised. We didn't see any sign of problems. The Thai people were super friendly and helped us out when they could. I would like to thank Tyler, Lou and Toni for an amazing trip. I'm looking forward to many more missions with you guys! For more information on kayaking in Thailand check out www.whitewater-koa.blogspot.com.



Lou Urwin running the Mae Pan Waterfall
Photo by: Toni George

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*Tyler Fox bursts out of the bush on Cobra Falls
Photo Josh Neilson*



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