



**Sunday**

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**Issue 06**

## **VCFS News: Your Information Resource**

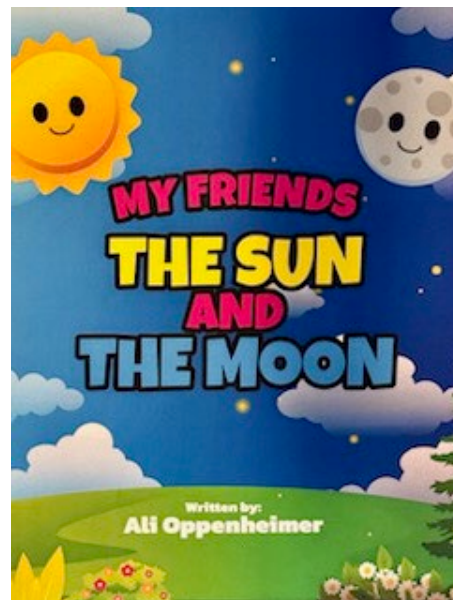
### **Upcoming launch of the Virtual Center's Peer Group Project**

Thank you to everyone that has responded to sign up to participate for the Virtual Center peer groups! We've had a great, in fact overwhelming response and are still accepting requests to join so please let us know if you would like to participate in these small, virtual groups to get together and have fun! We hope to launch within the coming weeks and are so excited to see you! Please email [jodi.bloom@vcfscenter.org](mailto:jodi.bloom@vcfscenter.org) with your child's name, location, age and hobbies and Raymond Cheng, our Director of the Peer Group Project will be in touch with you! We look forward to seeing you soon!

Jodi Bloom, MA  
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### **SPECIAL GIFT AVAILABLE AT NO COST TO OUR REGISTRANTS**

As we mentioned in last month's Newsletter, we have made a limited, but substantial supply of a wonderful children's book available to anyone who wants one while the supply lasts. The book, written by Ali Oppenheimer shown here, is a wonderful story reflecting the wonderful smile that always occupies Ali's face. To obtain a copy of the book, simply send a request by email to Jodi Bloom at [jodi.bloom@vcfscenter.org](mailto:jodi.bloom@vcfscenter.org).



# **My Trip To Thailand and Singapore: An Adventure Halfway Around the World** by Raymond Cheng, Newsletter Editor

## **Thailand**

There's something about traveling that gives you a feeling like no other. The exhilaration, breaths of fresh air different from home. It is something that you approach with intense anticipation and leave with wonderful memories. Travel resets your mind, your body and your soul. All you need to do is hop on a plane, train, bus or car to take you someplace you want to see. It alters you. There are so many places to visit, to create new memories. It's easy to get lost in the day-to-day repetition of life. Sometimes we need to take a break from the usual and have an adventure, whether big or small.

I hadn't travelled since last year, and I had made it a goal of mine to travel to at least one country per year (bonus points if it's a new one), so when I was invited by my friend to come to Thailand and Singapore with two of his friends, I was elated. I had been to Thailand before but not Singapore. We went to two cities—Bangkok and Singapore, both capitals of their countries. We would have done more but were limited by time. In Bangkok, we were to stay for seven days and five days in Singapore. Our flight left JFK airport February 29th and we would leave from Singapore two weeks later. It was going to be the longest time I've spent away from home in New York. I've also never travelled with friends before. Regardless, I was excited.

We landed in Bangkok around 11:20 PM after a 24-hour flight with a 5-hour layover in Saudi Arabia. I was desperate to get off the plane. Needless to say, we were relieved when we finally got to the hotel in Bangkok around midnight. Upon reaching the hotel we immediately noticed that it was different from New York. The culture, the streets, the whole environment. So many cars, motorbikes, and the famous Tuk Tuks on the roads. I forgot how hot it was in Bangkok. I was ready to begin my journey. We were hungry, so our first stop of the trip was a restaurant that was near the hotel. I loved that the streets and everywhere was still crowded even at midnight. I craved Pad Thai. I love Thai food and of course my first meal had to be a local dish.

It hit the spot. You know the feeling when you're craving for something, and when you're finally able to get it, you melt in happiness? That's what it was like for me when I took that first bite and sipped that first sip. The cold beer, the fresh noodles. Everything about it was perfection and so much better than the ones we get here in the States. That was the moment when I realized, I was here.

The next day saw us at a local market called Chatuchak Weekend Market. I thought nighttime was hot. Wow!. During the day, Bangkok is scorching. We saw the weather report for the rest of the week: 96 degrees Fahrenheit and rising. We were hit with the sun shining directly on our backs, and it was lucky we were able to buy some sunscreen. We began to explore and spent the day shopping at the thousands upon thousands of stalls (also known as hawkers), souvenir shopping, and even a dog café where I got to pet, hold and even feed a Shiba! It made me miss my own dog, Maru (also a Shiba), very much.

The stalls in Bangkok sell amazing local treats, snacks, fresh coconut and durian. I learned that durian, the world's smelliest fruit, is massively popular in Bangkok. I hated it, but my friends loved it. I had to try it anyway since we were there. Because of the heat that beat down on us, the

smoothies were also even fresher, and mangoes, apples (they had special apples called rose apples), and coconuts were mouthwatering.

It was an exhausting day with lots of sweat, walking around, and buying souvenirs. Yet all in all, it was a fun start to the trip. The next day we ventured out about an hour away from Bangkok to the famous dragon temple Wat Sam Phran. It was incredible. I've seen it in pictures before, but in real life, all I can say is WOW!!!. The way the dragon wrapped around the building, plus the other temples around, even in the heat, was worth seeing. We spent the day there, made some prayers, and then at night, we rode a Tuk Tuk for the first time and watched a local Broadway-like show. The Tuk Tuk ride was hilarious, with my friends trying to hang on to their dear lives in the cramped space, the tiny vehicle zooming past cars, bikes and pedestrians. It felt as though it was racing at two-hundred miles per hour, and when we finally got to the venue where the show was, we had to gather ourselves.

One other thing I realized quickly about Thailand was that the currency, the Bhat, is incredibly cheap compared to the United States Dollar. I could buy three huge bags of souvenirs from 7-11 (which I did) and it would cost a mere 14 dollars!

That night was also the night where I got my first Thai massage, and it was completely different from the ones I'd gotten in New York. They were harder on the muscles, more professional, and of course cheaper. I felt relaxed and peaceful.

You can't visit Thailand without a trip to the Golden Palace. We went the next day on the hottest day with the sun scorching at maximum effect. Of course, you aren't allowed to go to a temple with showing skin, and therefore we had to wear long pants and a T-shirt. That, along with the numerous tourists, made the humidity feel as if we were being baked in an oven. Honestly, it was a bit hard to enjoy the palace considering how boiling hot it was. Not even the fans scattered about the grounds could help the inevitable sunburn that was to come. Still, though, it was a nice experience to visit the temple. I often ponder how long it took for them to build such a colossal place.

We were at the Golden Palace for about five hours. When we finally were able to find shelter in an underground air-conditioned shopping mall (which led to the subway—or MRT), I collapsed on a bench from pure exhaustion. Still, we took some great group photos that day, and as the sun died down and night fell, it was time for me to venture out for solo sightseeing. This was the first time that I was separated from the group. I wanted to take some sunset pictures of the famous Wat Arun Temple, and they had no interest. With my Sony a6000 camera strapped around my neck, I took the MRT to a spot across the river where the temple could be seen. The sunset was around 7:30pm, and I thought I would have beaten the crowd if I had gotten there at 5 PM. I was wrong...so many tourists! It was hard for me to get a great picture of the temple and the sunset together, though I think I captured it well.

When I was satisfied with the pictures I had taken, I took another Tuk Tuk ride to a large shopping mall called Asiatique: The Riverfront. This Tuk Tuk ride was different than the first, but I was alone, so I had the whole vehicle to myself. It was a longer ride, crossing two bridges, costing a mere 300 Bhat, and let me tell you, it was one of the most exhilarating feelings I have

ever experienced. It was the highlight of my trip, without a doubt. Being there by myself, going that speed, it made me feel like a king. This is what travelling felt like, I thought. Asiatique itself was a great experience (riding the Ferris wheel with my friends was a spontaneous act, more hawkers, plus soul-warming food and beanie bags to lounge around), but that Tuk Tuk ride was something else. I knew that even if I did it again, it would not be the same feeling as the first time. I'm glad that I did it.

The following day saw us at a water park about an hour drive from Bangkok called Siam Amazing Park. We were looking forward to getting a break from the burning sun. I had gotten a sunburn around my neck which was thankfully only a nuisance. The rides were fun especially because I hadn't been to a water park in years. I felt my inner child come out again. At night, we visited another highlight of Bangkok—an enormous shopping mall called ICONSIAM. It was massive, with stories upon stories of shops allowing a lot of wandering around. It was there that we found a Michelin-starred restaurant, and it isn't an over exaggeration when I say that I had the best mango sticky-rice I have ever eaten. Remember when I said that the Thai Bhat was cheaper in comparison to the US Dollar? The four of us had a full meal including drinks, appetizers and desserts (the mango sticky-rice was so good I got a second), and the total amount of the bill blew me away at a mere \$96. I guessed it would have been closer to \$300 in New York City where I live.

About 45 minutes outside of Bangkok, there's a place called the Ancient City, or Mueang Boran in the Thai language. It is a museum of replicas of ancient buildings dating back more than 4,000 years. We went there the next day. I had never heard of it before, but when we arrived, I knew immediately why it was a popular tourist destination. It was a huge park, so we had to rent a golf cart to explore the whole place. Everywhere I looked, there was a photo opportunity. And every photo was a postcard.

There were numerous Chinese and Korean tour groups that scattered the area. But I was not going to let them stop me from taking incredible pictures, finding different perspectives, exploring different angles. This is why I love photography. There are countless ways you can become creative with your subject, memories frozen in time, it makes me feel like a child again. And I quickly realized that I love flower photography—the colors of each pedal of the flower pops out from a variety of angles, positioning the camera from one place to the other can bring out a completely different type of picture. I had taken a photography class years ago when I was a teenager. I was taught several tips and tricks when it comes to photography, such as the “rule of third,” and focusing on the subject. Those lessons taught me to love photography even more. I applied that knowledge and concluded I should pursue photography as a hobby.

It was the last day in Thailand and I could not believe how fast it had come and gone. Seven days gone in the blink of an eye. I guess they really do mean it when it is said that time flies when you're having fun. It was sad, yet I knew that all good things had to come to an end eventually. At least there was still Singapore looming before me. The last day saw us at a floating market, about an hour from Bangkok. We were to visit a nearby train market as well, about a twenty minutes' drive from the floating market. We hired our driver to wait for us while we explored each market.



The floating market in my opinion, was a bit of a tourist trap. High prices, lots of people, yet still a great experience to try at least once. The train market was a more fun experience considering that there was an actual active train going through the market! Perhaps that's why thousands of visitors go there daily. There were hundreds of stalls offering smoothies, fruits, trinkets, bags, wallets, homemade items, clothes, food, anything you can think of buying. In comparison to durian, the king of fruits, there is another tropical fruit called mangosteen, known as the queen of fruits, that, in my opinion, was much sweeter and juicier. They are both sold in bulk all over in Bangkok, and I was glad to try them locally. The finale was interesting. At exactly 2:30 PM, the train came through the market. You can hear the train whistling in the distance. It was surreal to see every stand close temporarily so the train can pass by. When the train leaves, every stand reopens, sets up shop once again, and I was told that they do this eight times a day.

It was an exhausting yet exhilarating last few days, and I knew there was still Singapore left.



Golden Palace, Bangkok, Thailand



Golden Palace, Bangkok with Yaksha Mythical Figures



Golden Palace, Kimmara figures





Wat Samphran, Thailand



Ancient City, Thailand



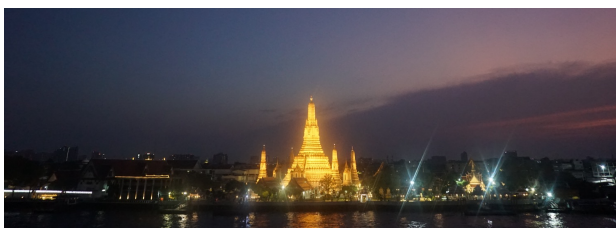
Entrance to Wat Sam Phran, Temple in Thailand



Dog Cafe at Chatuchak Weekend Market, Thailand



Ancient City, Thailand



Wat Arun, Bangkok, Buddhist Temple

# Singapore

It was about a two-hour plane ride from Bangkok to Singapore. As soon as we landed, we were instantaneously stunned at the difference. We immediately fell in love with Singapore so much more. The air was fresher; there wasn't that much pollution on the roads; the water was drinkable. My friend was literally jumping for joy when he discovered how clean it was and quipped he had found a new home here.

The first morning we had Singapore's national dish, nesi lemak for breakfast. I've seen it made online, but it was the first time I've tried it in person, let alone at the source. It was amazing, with so much flavor throughout. The rice, flavored with touches of coconut milk and pandan leaves, worked well with the chicken, fish, egg, spicy chili sauce, fried anchovies and peanuts. Along with nesi lemak, I tried their popular Milo drink, a creamy chocolate milk that was just as delicious.

Our hotel was situated next to the famed Bugis Street, where countless hawkers lined up against each other, souvenir shops and tourists wandering about, where during the day there would be so much activity it makes your head spin. At certain points, I would want to retreat to the hotel for safety and comfort; too much stimulation and anxiety to be outside. Nevertheless, we bought some magnets, snacks and more durian. At night, we travelled to Chinatown. It was a beautiful night, and I loved how it wasn't steaming hot like Bangkok. The weather was perfect—not too hot, not too cold. I loved that we could walk around in a sweater and not feel like we were roasting.

Of course, Chinatown had its tourists, but I immediately noticed that it was much more extravagant than the one in New York. We had dinner, meandered some more, and made our way back to the hotel. It was a great first day, with me already looking forward to the next day.

Just like Bangkok, it was time for me to solo travel for a day, separate from the group. I wanted to visit the Singapore Botanic Gardens, while they wanted to go shopping. I wanted to practice on my flower photography that I had developed while in Bangkok, and I was aware that there would be millions of them in the garden. I also wanted to snap some photos of the Marina Bay Sands, at the famous Merlion Park, to get a postcard picture at sunset. They had no interest in doing any of these activities, so I ventured out alone.

I took the MRT to the Singapore Botanic Garden. During the short ride, I noticed how clean it was. Everyone was polite, there were no homeless people sleeping on the trains, and it was just nothing like you see in New York. I also noticed a sign in front of me that read with pictures: **No eating or drinking/ No smoking / No flammable goods/ No durians**. I smiled and chuckled at the “no durians” part and instantly connected the dots. You definitely don't see *that* in New York.

The Singapore Botanic Gardens was overwhelming. It was huge. There really were millions of orchids, local and international flowers, in huge quantities. There was a lake where I met some friendly otters and turtles, a rainforest mimic that you can get easily lost in (it reminded me of that one in Central Park). A spot in the Gardens is called the National Orchid Garden and was a

wonderful large area with a lot to see. Everywhere I looked there was a photo opportunity to snap a picture. It rained, or more accurately poured! I was trapped under a small shelter for a while (I thought how my friends must feel nice and cozy in a shopping mall right now), and it was a bit of an annoyance getting wet, but the pictures I took were absolutely fantastic. How lucky am I, I thought, that it rained today. Out of all days that I was there, it rained on the day that I wanted to practice my photography skills.

I was at the Gardens for a good four to five hours, and when I was finally exhausted from all the picture-taking and walking, I bought myself some souvenirs from the giftshop there and decided it was time to head to Merlion Park. I was happy. I was getting my money's worth.

Merlion Park was intense. Like everywhere else, there were an insane number of tourists, countless people with more Chinese and Korean tour groups, too many people. But the view...to say that it was breathtaking is an understatement. Like the Wat Arun Temple in Bangkok, it was tough to get a picture without a head or a hand invading the picture. I waited on the steps until it got dark and took some *very* touristy pictures myself. Then, when night came, and the Marina Bay Sands hotel lit up, I knew I had the shot.

About an hour or so later, it was time to go back to the hotel. What an incredible day for photography. The smile on my face grew when I revisited the photos back at the room. The next day we were to go to Universal Studios, so I wouldn't be needing my camera then. I'm glad I was able to get what I wanted today.

Universal Studios was incredible. I was terrified of rollercoasters, but I haven't been to a Universal since I was a child, and since I was here, I figured, why not? I sucked it up, like the water park in Bangkok, told myself that I may never come here again, and why not? And thus I had the time of my life, waiting on dreadful lines like the Transformers, and getting the express pass to go to the Cylon. I rode the Cylon myself, too, which was a shell I had to get out of completely, and boy was I glad that I did. I couldn't believe I was able to muster up the courage to do it. It was exhilarating, screaming at the top of my lungs, feeling like the top of the world. We spent the whole day at Universals, doing whatever we wanted yet again until our hearts were content.

It was the last full day of our trip. I couldn't believe it. Time really had flown by. We had jam-packed so many things within two weeks, and tomorrow we were flying out. Blink and you missed it. There was one last thing left on the agenda: the famous Gardens by the Bay. It was one of the main things we wanted to do during the trip. We could not leave Singapore before seeing Gardens by the Bay.

When we arrived, it was during the day, and thus, in my opinion, not as beautiful. But during the day, we walked around various parts of the grounds, such as the Cloud Forest and Flower Dome. And once again, numerous photo opportunities anywhere you turn.

When night fell, *that* was when it became spectacular. The so-called Supertree lit up, and abruptly a performance they dubbed "Garden Rhapsody" began to play. It was mesmerizing, and

me and my three friends simply sat there, looking up, admiring with smiles on our faces. The manmade trees looming above us, an iconic symbol.

With that performance ending, so did our trip, and we were to leave the airport tomorrow for our final goodbye. That last night had us remembering all the good times and all the great times during the trip. My friend asked us what our most memorable part of the trip was, what the best food we ate, the best drink we drank. Going around in a circle, sharing our thoughts. Smiling, I realized that traveling with friends was one of the best ways to travel.

The last day in Singapore saw us doing everything one last time. There were vending machines lined up, as there often are in Asia, selling fresh orange juice and sugar cane juice. I had yet to try it, and thus I had to before I leave. And my god, it is not an over exaggeration when I say that it was the best orange juice I had ever had in my life. The sugar cane juice was amazing too, something all my friends loved as well, but the orange juice for me takes the spot. Why can't New York have vending machines like these?

Singapore's Jewel Changi Airport was insanely large. The first thing that caught our eye was the iconic waterfall situated in the middle of the airport. There were many things to do, and as we finally began our way to board the plane, my friends and I discussed how this would be the last time we travelled as a group for a while, and I was sad. I wasn't looking forward to the 29-hour flight back, with a five-hour layover in Saudi Arabia yet again, but overall, the trip was fantastic. Thailand might have been dreadfully hot, but at least everything was so cheap there. Singapore might have not been as "cheap" as the Thai Bhat, but at least it was so clean and the air was fresh. I might have to go back again.

I literally took over 1400 pictures and videos combined, and on the flight back reflected on my life before, now and in the future. It's something I love about traveling, and hope I can do it again sometime soon.

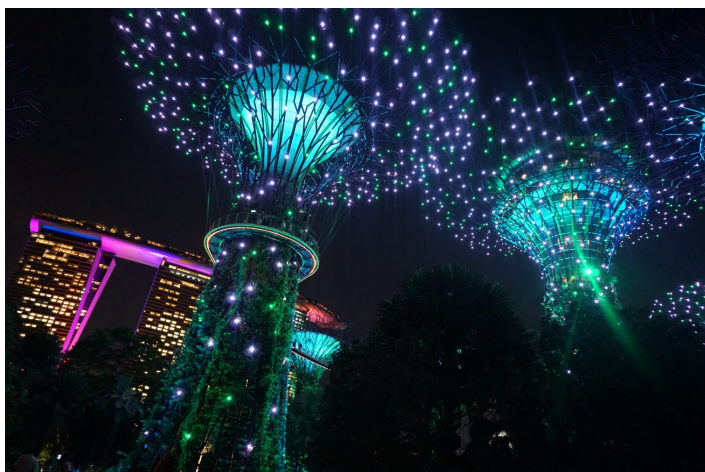




Chinatown, Singapore



Botanical Gardens, Singapore



Garden by the Bay, Singapore



Singapore Airport





Merlion Park, Singapore



Orchids from the Botanical Gardens, Singapore



The Virtual Center for VCFS