

Essay

# KYBT Expat Experience Report

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## 1. Introduction

From September 2014 to June 2017, I worked overseas at our group company KYB (Thailand) Co., Ltd. (KYBT). This was the first time living overseas for me, my wife and two children (who were two years old and nine months old at the time).

The people of Thailand are very friendly towards children, and my children were often greeted warmly by many Thais when we went out. My children received small trinkets such as tumblers and stuffed toys, probably items used as giveaways, at the supermarket we often shopped at. I have a memory of the first time we went out to eat. Eating out with children is not an easy task, and the local staff at the restaurant went out of their way to look after my children while we dined. However, I was taken by surprise when they scooped up my children and took them to the backyard of the restaurant. That made me extremely nervous, and I recall not being able to relax and eat my meal in peace.

It may be because of this culture that Children's Day in Thailand is a major event. I remember when the department store EmQuartier brought in famous overseas heroes to entertain children (Photo 1). It was almost as though we were in Hollywood!



Photo 1 Children's Day event

## 2. Life in Thailand

There are approximately 70 thousand Japanese living in Thailand, and Bangkok is home to over 50 thousand of them. For this reason, there are many restaurants and supermarkets geared towards Japanese residents, enabling us to live comfortably there, just like back home. The prices of Japanese food in Thailand are about the same as of that in Japan. Other items (which have been imported from Japan) are approximately three times more expensive.

Many Japanese people reside in an area called Sukhumvit (Photo 2). Most of the Japanese residents can be found in the area east of Asok, such as Phrom Phong, Thong Lo and Ekkamai, but there has been a recent surge of Japanese expats in the further eastern areas of Phra Khanong and On Nut. For daily transport, taxis, songthaews (mini-trucks altered to sit passengers in the truck bed), motorcycle taxis and BTS (Bangkok Mass Transit System) are used.



Photo 2 BTS route map (for the Sukhumvit area)

There are supermarkets all over the city for shopping, and there are many convenience stores within walking distance, just like Japan, so there was never trouble in buying things.

Transport to and from Japanese schools and kindergartens was by bus, and because these buses only operate in certain areas, the price for family-geared properties has seem to be going up. The number of housing properties going for over 80 thousand baht (approximately 250 thousand yen) per month has increased.

Factors that we focused on when selecting our home was having hospitals and supermarkets within walking distance, and possibly to have a home that was more spacious than our home in Japan. The drainage system in Sukhumvit is extremely poor, and major rainfall often caused the roads to flood and traffic congestion. The worst traffic jam I experienced took me three hours to get to a location that usually took only 15 minutes. As you can see, traffic was always congested in the city, so having a hospital within walking distance was helpful many times.

Tap water in Bangkok is unfit for drinking, unlike the water in Japan. To prepare for water shortages, our family used the water delivery services offered by Club Thailand. This company operates a water delivery business and has golfing reservation services as well. Users must pay an annual fee, but having a Club Thailand card (Photo 3) offers perks such as complementary drinks at Club Thailand stores (located near the first supermarket to cater to Japanese people, the Fuji Supermarket, allowing shoppers to drop by between shopping). The card also offers discounts at restaurants, and is a convenient card to have, even if you do not play golf.



**Photo 3** Club Thailand member's card

### 3. Thai Cuisine

Thai dishes are often spicy and flavored with cayenne pepper. Never underestimate the spiciness of Thai cuisine—the locals say the spicier it is, the better.

The first time I tried some local dishes, I couldn't help but exclaiming, "This is too spicy! Just being hot and spicy does not make food good!" As you can see, it is better to notify the chef to "hold the spiciness" if you are not extremely confident with spicy dishes.

Saying "mai pet" will have them leave out cayenne pepper from your food (still, there is often some put in the food despite this).

Thai locals often season their food to their liking. Therefore containers of nam pla (fish sauce), sugar, chopped peppers in vinegar and powdered peppers are always set on the table. Enjoying dishes in your own

unique flavor is typical in Thailand. I wholeheartedly recommend enjoying the "spicy, sour, sweet and savory" flavors found in Thai food.

If you enjoy Thai cuisine, you will probably want to try out the food stalls as well. However, I generally do not recommend eating at food stalls. The ingredients are often stored in the scorching daytime heat, and the water used to wash the dishes is not sanitary. One hears many tales of people getting sick from the water.

Instead of food stalls, I would like to recommend the food courts found in department stores. Food courts often feature popular local restaurants and are more hygienic as well. They are more expensive than food stalls, but more affordable than stand-alone Thai restaurants. Customers can also try food from many different restaurants as well.

These food courts usually have a system where customers pay with prepaid cards. These cards can be purchased at ticket centers in the food courts. Any money left over on the prepaid cards can be reimbursed at the same ticket center within that day.

My family always had weekend lunch outings at the Emporium or EmQuartier.

My favorite dish was Pad Thai (Thai fried noodles) with oysters, or Som Tum Thai (salad with green papayas) (Photo 4). I miss these dishes, even now!



**Photo 4** Som Tum Thai

By the way, do you know the different meats that are consumed in Thailand? The people of Thailand prefer chicken and pork, and beef is not very popular there. The chicken is especially fresh in Thailand, and there are many Gai Yaang (BBQ chicken) stalls on the street. However, I recommend trying out Kentucky Fried Chicken in Thailand as well.

I especially recommend the Kentucky Fried Chicken branches in Phrom Phong's Big C or Gateway Ekamai. The turnover rate for these two stores is very fast, and they offer soft and juicy fried chicken. Customers can select from fried chicken seasoned with pepper or the

original type (order the original type if you want to have fried chicken similar to that in Japan).

#### 4. Working in Thailand

The first obstacle one faces when working in Thailand is the language. The Thai language uses characters such as “ภาษาไทย”. When seen from a Japanese point-of-view, these characters look like doodles. It is almost impossible to read or understand any of them. As for pronunciation, the language features five different tones (the same words have five different meanings depending on the tone in which it is spoken) which unaccustomed Japanese people find very difficult to tell apart. Conversation becomes difficult when one cannot understand what is being said. Staff members at factory manager level may have a moderate grasp of English, but conversation on-site and in daily life is all done in Thai. Just having a moderate grasp of English offers a great peace of mind in this situation. If there are any opportunities to use English in your work, I wholeheartedly recommend studying it.

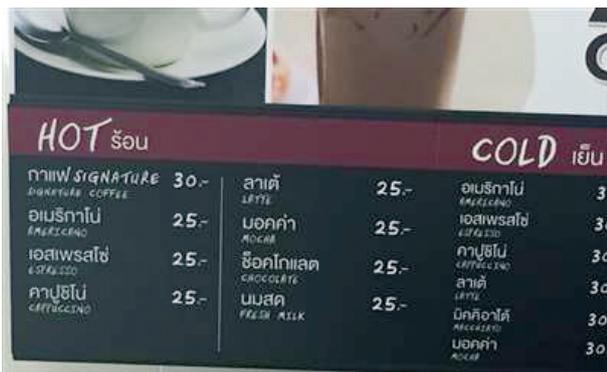


Photo 5 Difference between Thai and English

I could not say that all the Thai people I met had a good command of English—however, they spoke it with confidence. Communication can be made without perfect grammar, so I believe that Thailand is the perfect place for Japanese people to practice speaking and build confidence, which is often difficult for us.

Thai English is spoken with a unique “Thai accent”, which makes it difficult to understand at times. However, this type of accent can be seen in other countries as well, so there is no need to worry. One can have the speaker write the content down on paper if there is trouble comprehending the accent.

If you have trouble talking, I recommend starting communication by jotting down what you want to say on a piece of paper. My English was extremely poor, so I started off by writing down notes of what I was going to say and referring to those notes while I was talking (my written English was terrible as well, but still better than my spoken English...). In any event, I set myself off to get accustomed to speaking, instead of overthinking and

becoming nervous as a result

Although my current TOEIC scores are dismal despite my frequent use of English, I believe that I have been able to successfully communicate with people from Asian countries (such as people from Thailand, Indonesia, and Malaysia, who I met through work).

#### 5. Entertainment and Travel in Thailand

When asked about things to do in Thailand, I believe many people think of golf. There is a multitude of golf courses to choose from around the Bangkok area. The golf season lasts all year round, and golf courses which Japanese people often frequent offer caddies as well for approximately 3000 baht a day (10,000 yen) on weekends. Carts cost an additional 700 baht (approximately 2,500 yen). Many golfers prefer to walk and not use carts, as most Thai golf courses can be played without carts. One can play from six in the morning, go through 18 holes without lunch, and finish before noon, if all goes well.

If you have never tried golf before in Japan, Thailand is an excellent place to start learning. The warm climate loosens up your body, and the courses are more level and easier to swing in than Japan. There are many people who enjoy golf every weekend, due to this wonderful environment.



Photo 6 Professional golf tournament at the Amata Spring Country Club

You may be worried that playing so much golf will be exhausting—but there is no need for concern, as Thailand has excellent massage salons. Authentic Thai massages charge approximately 300 baht (1,000 yen) an hour, which is very reasonable compared to massages in Japan. There are many massage plans one can choose from, but the most popular ones are the Thai massages or foot massages.

A Thai massage evenly loosens up the entire body, and a foot massage focuses on the area below the knee such as the calves and shins. A 90-minute foot massage after golf is very nice.

As for travel, I have heard many stories of people traveling overseas. I cannot say much about this subject, as I have not travelled extensively, but it seems that the Maldives and Bali are very popular. Neighboring Cambodia and its world heritage site Angkor Wat is also a common travel site.

There are many all-inclusive tours going to domestic locations such as Phuket, Chiang Mai, and Krabi, but our family always headed toward Pattaya.

Pattaya is a three-hour drive from Bangkok, allowing easy access with children. We always rented a vehicle with a driver for transport. We would always book a hotel with a large/good selection of pools and just kick back and relax at the poolside, because doing various activities with toddlers was not an option.

Although this is slightly off topic, condominiums in Thailand often come with pools and parks, so it may be feasible for families with smaller children. Thailand is hot all year round, so there is a need to secure a place indoors where children can exercise and play.

Another place that children enjoy is the zoo. Our family often visited Bangkok's Safari World, where one can feed the herd of giraffes (Photo 7). Please note that toddlers may become frightened as so many giraffes come to feed.



Photo 7 Giraffes at Bangkok's Safari World

## 6. In Closing

This was my first experience living in Thailand, and my wife's support was crucial in allowing me to focus on my job. I am very grateful for her, and for having her bring our two little boys with us. There were many instances that I had to work on weekends as well, leaving her to take care of the children.

We returned to Japan just when our children started kindergarten and became slightly more independent than before. Because of this, I believe our family was not able to experience the full charms of Thailand, so I am looking forward to visiting again on our own.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank my KYBT colleagues, the local and resident staff, and everyone who supported me and allowed me to have this wonderful experience in Thailand.

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### Author



#### **SETOGUCHI Kazuhiro**

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 Planning and Administration Sect.,  
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