

Essay from Expatriate in Thailand

KAWABE Toshiharu

1. Introduction

Over about four years from November 2020 through December 2024, I was assigned to KYB Asia Pacific (KAP) in Thailand, where I was engaged in the design of shock absorbers (SA). During my time there, I experienced various events, including living overseas for the first time, the raging COVID-19 pandemic, restrictions on activity after the state of emergency was declared, and the recovery period after the pandemic ended. However, I gained valuable experience. The following outlines some of those experiences.

2. Assignment to Thailand

2.1 Preparation for Assignment

Initially, I was preparing for the assignment starting in April 2020. In February, I flew to Thailand to make preliminary preparations and experience the unique atmosphere of Southeast Asia. There, I met expatriates who would support me both professionally and personally, as well as local staff with whom I would work. I also checked out the apartment I would be moving into and even signed a temporary lease agreement. My preparations for expatriation were going smoothly.

However, due to the sudden emergence and rapid spread of the novel coronavirus, the assignment plans were all suspended. At the time of my preliminary travel to Thailand, Japan had also started to report daily infections, but I thought it was a distant problem that would soon subside. However, things were not that simple. As you know, the virus spread worldwide starting in March. Overseas travel was restricted or banned. The entry visa I had obtained became invalid. At that time, all we heard was grim news about the infections. There was no indication that the travel restrictions would be lifted. I remember that time when we were stuck in a situation where we could not see the future.

About six months later, when things had finally settled down, I found a way to travel to Thailand. The travel requirements were incredibly strict by today's standards. I had to prepare many application documents. The final hurdle was testing negative for the virus with a PCR test within 72 hours of departure. A positive result

would have ruined all my preparations. To avoid this risk, I took meticulous care of my health in my daily life. Fortunately, I did not become infected and was able to enter Thailand.

2.2 Entering Thailand

The day of my trip to Thailand finally arrived, but I faced challenges upon arrival. Although the travel ban had been lifted, strict restrictions remained in place. Authorities scrutinized all application documents of those entering the country and required them to take a PCR test. When I arrived at the airport, a long line had already formed (Photo 1).

The airport staff, all of whom were wearing protective gear, treated all arrivals as if they were infected with the virus. We had to sit in chairs spaced at appropriate intervals. I underwent document checks and took another PCR test. After all the results came back negative, I was finally granted entry into Thailand.



Photo 1 Immigration inspection under travel restrictions

Even then, we were not allowed to move around freely. Next, we were required to quarantine for two weeks at an Alternative State Quarantine (ASQ), a Thai government-accredited accommodation facility. After passing through immigration, staff in protective gear guided us and kept us under surveillance. They put me in the back seat of a large van (Photo 2).

Even if others were headed to the same place, we did not share rides. Everyone was assigned a dedicated chartered vehicle. Although the transportation was luxurious, I did not feel privileged. This was probably because the rear seat was completely separated from the driver's

seat by an impersonal transparent vinyl sheet stretched taut with no gaps. Feeling anxious yet thrilled, I was taken to the quarantine hotel.



Photo 2 Transportation to quarantine accommodations

2.3 Quarantine Life

After a one-hour ride from the airport, I arrived at a hotel in Bangkok. Instead of being dropped off at the front lobby, I was dropped off at the back gate. There was certainly no sign of the welcoming atmosphere of Thailand, also known as the “country of smiles.” In hindsight, the country might have been accepting international visitors discreetly, avoiding public attention, since rumors would swirl on social media every time a new case of COVID-19 was found. There, I was asked to take another PCR test, even though I had just taken one at the airport. Of course, the result was negative. I was guided to my room and finally released from that long, tense state.

Life during the two-week quarantine was harsh. During the first week, I wasn't allowed to leave my room at all. The heavy entrance door was only opened for regular patrol checks by staff in protective gear and to deliver meals, which were placed on a small table in the hallway. After enduring such a socially isolated life for a week, I had to take another PCR test. After testing negative, I was permitted to go out onto the roof for just one hour each day. I remember experiencing how wonderful it was being exposed to the sunlight and breathing the outside air.

During the second half of my quarantine, I experienced a classic Southeast Asian hardship. I suffered severe food poisoning, which resulted in diarrhea and vomiting, as well as fever symptoms. Since there was a possibility that I might be suspected of having the virus and transferred to another quarantine facility, I took medicine I had brought from Japan, slept a lot, and prayed for recovery. The next day, during the patrol check, the temperature inspection showed that I still had a fever. I smiled and explained to the staff in protective gear that my body was still hot because I had just woken up and I didn't have any symptoms of having the virus. They looked puzzled and walked away. Perhaps they did not understand my faltering English. In any case, I

overcame the biggest crisis. Soon after, I recovered and passed a PCR test on the last day, which ended my tough quarantine (Photo 3).



Photo 3 Souvenir from quarantine life, Beginning of assignment in Thailand

3. Expatriation in Thailand

After completing my quarantine without incident, I started living in Thailand. By then, the number of patients with the virus in Thailand had already decreased. Unlike the strict regulations imposed on traveling visitors, restrictions on city activities had been lifted. I was able to start living in Thailand without any inconveniences.

3.1 Work

Primarily as an SA designer in Thailand, I was responsible for supporting the development of ASEAN bases, reducing costs through local procurement, and troubleshooting mass production issues. I had difficulty communicating with the locals at first, partly due to my initial experience living abroad. However, since the Thai staff were accustomed to working with Japanese people, we gradually became able to communicate with each other in faltering English, which was a second language for both of us.

Furthermore, it was necessary to collaborate not only with Thai bases, but also with those in Malaysia, Indonesia, and Taiwan. Even within the same ASEAN region, working with people from different countries meant dealing with different languages and cultures. Achieving consensus while doing business with these people was difficult, but I believe it was a valuable experience (Photos 4 and 5).

Throughout the development of ASEAN bases, I was always mindful of the concept of self-reliance. In most previous cases, Japanese companies, including automotive manufacturers as customers, led the development and transferred operations to local sites to establish production. However, in this case, we transferred operations to the local site from the early stages of development, shifting the approach from Japan-led to locally-led. To meet the expectations of our customers, we had to change the way we did business. I thought it would be difficult for the locals to do so suddenly without

support from Japan, but the KAP staff demonstrated strong motivation and technical skills. They quickly grasped the meaning of locally-led development and self-reliance. Of course, we received support from the Japan side and ASEAN bases, but I believe we achieved the best possible results thanks to the KAP staff's hard work.

We successfully completed the locally led development process, from proposing performance improvement items to adopting them. Additionally, in sourcing activities for key models whose commercial rights are currently held by competitors, we collaborated with KYB (Thailand) Co., Ltd. (KYBT) to promote cost reduction activities from the factory and design perspectives. We ultimately received long-awaited orders. Going forward, I would also like to promote self-reliance activities, which are still in progress.

I would like to take this opportunity to apologize to and thank the expatriates and local staff at each base, including those in Japan, for the considerable inconvenience we caused them and for their tremendous support.



Photo 4 KAP staff



Photo 5 Process improvement activities at three ASEAN bases (KAP, KYBT, and *KMSB); *KMSB: KYB Malaysia Sdn. Bhd.

3.2 Living Environment

Thailand is a well-known Japanophile country. As of 2020, it had approximately 80,000 Japanese residents, 50,000 of whom lived in Bangkok, a city with a large expatriate population. When walking around Bangkok, it is highly likely that you will see Japanese people. Due to the large Japanese

population, it is easy to buy Japanese food ingredients at Japanese supermarkets and find countless Japanese restaurants. These restaurants serve Japanese food that rivals that found in Japan—not the “imitation” Japanese food often found overseas. I never had trouble with my diet, although Japanese food was slightly more expensive than Thai food.

I was surprised by how widely used the local cashless payment system was. In my opinion, it is more popular in Thailand than in Japan. The most common payment method is scanning QR codes, which are available at virtually every type of shop. Even local markets and street vendors display them on their counters (Photo 6). When you use a bank app, the amount is instantly deducted from your bank account. This fee-free system does not require customers to register their credit cards. Foreign residents can quickly use the system, too. I didn't need to carry much cash with me wherever I went.



Photo 6 Khlong Toei market

I lived in a part of Bangkok with a large Japanese population. The area is densely packed with Japanese facilities, including a general hospital with Japanese interpreters available at all times, supermarkets, and restaurants. It is a very convenient area, except for the terrible traffic jams and flooding during heavy rain.

In Thailand, which is hot year-round, north-facing rooms with little sunlight are preferred. The first apartment I lived in faced southwest. I remember coming home from work and finding it terribly hot. Since apartments are leased under a one-year contract, you can move when the contract renews. In addition to the orientation of the rooms, there are many things you can only notice after living there, such as noise from neighboring facilities and plumbing issues. For these reasons, and for the sake of change, many expatriates change residences.

The apartment I moved to during my second year had moderate sunlight and was not so hot. It was near a station of an elevated transit system called BTS, which was very convenient (Photo 7). The BTS was a valuable means of transportation on holidays because it allowed me to avoid traffic

jams. After that, I never moved again, staying in the same apartment until I returned to Japan.

3.3 Transportation

Bangkok's city center has a well-developed transportation network that includes an elevated railway (BTS) and a subway system (MRT).



Photo 7 Elevated railway (BTS) in Bangkok

Outside of this area, you need a car to travel anywhere. Bangkok experiences terrible traffic jams during the morning and evening rush hours, especially in the rainy season. I usually commute from Bangkok to Chon Buri, where my office is located. The commute takes about one to one and a half hours each way. During the rainy season, it has sometimes taken me over three hours just to get home.

Unlike Japan, Thailand does not have distinct seasons. It enjoys perpetual summer, but its year is divided into three seasons: dry (November to February), hot (March to May), and rainy (June to October). Nearly half of the year falls under the rainy season. During this time, floods occur throughout the country. One cause is topographical issues. Bangkok's altitude is only about 1.5 meters, making it one of the world's lowest altitude cities. Since the land behind the city has only a slight difference in altitude, rivers flow slowly. When large amounts of rain fall, water cannot drain into the sea quickly enough, resulting in widespread flooding. I heard that the drainage systems are being improved. However, based on my experience living in Thailand for four years, it seems that progress has been slow. I'm very worried about what will happen to Bangkok when the sea level rises due to global warming.

Expatriates at KAP are not permitted to drive. On workdays, we relied on driver support, and on holidays, we often took taxis. Taxis in Thailand are extraordinarily cheap compared with Japan. The initial charge is 35 baht (about 160 yen) and increases based on distance and time. A one-hour ride only costs about 1,000 yen.

However, extreme caution is necessary because rip-offs and scams are rampant in these taxis. Drivers may refuse to use the meter for foreigners

and tourists, demanding unreasonable prices or presenting an inflated price upon arrival at the destination. Although they are few, some drivers behave poorly. I've heard that some drivers hide firearms under the dashboard, which could be dangerous if trouble occurs.

You can now avoid such trouble by using taxi-booking mobile apps (like Grab), which have recently become widespread. These apps allow you to set your destination and see the fare before you get in the taxi. Of course, not all taxi drivers are bad. Many Thai people are cheerful. I met some drivers who spoke to me in broken Japanese or played Japanese music as soon as they realized I was Japanese. As long as you use them with due caution, taxis are a very convenient means of transportation.

Local buses are even cheaper, costing around 8 to 25 baht (about 36 to 120 yen), depending on whether they have air conditioning and how far they travel. This makes them an essential mode of transportation for locals. There are countless local bus lines in Bangkok, reaching areas inaccessible by train. However, bus schedules are often delayed by traffic jams. You cannot expect buses to arrive on time. Furthermore, when riding on a bus, you must tell the driver your destination and pay the fare in advance, which makes using local buses quite difficult. In the spirit of giving it a try, I first tried a local bus in my third year of living in Thailand, by which time I had almost become accustomed to the country. They were highly convenient when I had extra time or was going to certain destinations. I used them occasionally, but I almost never saw other Japanese people. Local buses are a means of transportation that allows you to experience the local atmosphere.

3.4 Thai Cuisine

Once I had adjusted to work and daily life in Thailand, I actively sought out Thai cuisine, thinking, "I should try it since I'm living in a foreign country." In short, many Thai dishes are flavorful. In particular, their spiciness is definitely different from Japanese food. For that reason, even if you normally like spicy food, you should never say, "I like spicy food" there. When ordering food, you are asked to specify your preferred level of spiciness. In most cases, you will regret ordering "normal" or "a little spicy." The "normal" spiciness of Thai people is totally different from that of Japanese people. However, if you order the "right" level of spiciness, there are plenty of Thai dishes that suit Japanese tastes.

I recommend gapao rice, a Thai classic and a very popular dish (Photo 8). Although it is a simple dish of stir-fried ingredients with holy basil (gapao) poured over rice, it has incredible depth. While minced pork is the most popular choice, other options are available, including fried pork belly, chicken, beef, shrimp, squid, and other seafood. You will never get bored with gapao rice. I often compared various gapao rice dishes, not just at nearby restaurants and local stalls where most

customers are Thai, as well as through food delivery services to find my favorite spots.

I also recommend the prawn dishes. Volcano prawns are famous in Nakhon Pathom province, which is located in the suburbs of Bangkok. You can choose the size of the prawns (large or small) and order them by the kilogram. The prawns are grilled under a volcano-shaped lid, over which alcohol is poured and ignited. This fire performance makes the dish visually entertaining, too (Photo 9). Despite the restaurant being a bit far from Bangkok, I scheduled golf outings nearby to regularly visit it with expatriates and suppliers.



Photo 8 Gapao rice



Photo 9 Volcano prawns

Thai people like spiciness and sweetness. As with spiciness, you should be careful with sweetness if you prefer it to be moderate. Thai tea contains a plenty of sugar when ordered normally. It is difficult to find unsweetened coffee at a convenience store or supermarket. It may be surprising, but even Japanese tea in a PET bottle usually contains sugar. While the labels can be confusing, you can tell the difference between bottled tea with and without sugar by the color of the cap. Even so, I have bought the wrong one several times and regretted it.

Thai fruit is also worth mentioning, since it is so inexpensive and delicious. Mangoes in particular are recommended and cost around 50 to 100 baht

(230 to 450 yen) each. You can easily find ones that rival those sold in high-end Japanese fruit shops. Of course, you can eat them as is, but Thai people commonly enjoy them as Khao Niao Mamuang, where mangoes are served with sticky rice and coconut milk poured on top. Since fresh fruit cannot be brought to Japan, I often bought dried mangoes at Mae Varee, a famous mango shop near my apartment. They were always very well received (Photo 10). If I have the chance to go to Thailand again, I definitely want to stop by.



Photo 10 Mango specialty shop, Mae Varee

3.5 Activity Restrictions Due to the State of Emergency Declaration

Although the pandemic subsided shortly after I became an expatriate, new variants of the virus were discovered in 2021. Patients with these variants were identified in Thailand as well. They spread across the nation quickly, increasing the number of infected people day by day. In response, the Thai government gradually strengthened regulations, imposing limitations on activities, including a nighttime curfew and shorter business hours. These restrictions gradually stole our freedom in daily life. I heard that the whole world was in a similar situation, resulting in people buying up commodities such as food and masks. However, Thailand did not reach such a severe situation. I don't recall essential items becoming unavailable.

Nevertheless, the situation remained unresolved. Finally, the Thai government declared a state of emergency and imposed the strictest activity restrictions. A curfew was enforced after 9 p.m. Shopping malls, golf courses, and other leisure facilities were closed day and night. Restaurants were banned from serving food and drinks inside and were open for shorter hours. For a while, only hospitals, supermarkets, pharmacies, and convenience stores remained open.

On weekdays, I had nothing to do and stayed home except commuting between home and work. Work meetings were held online, so we no longer had face-to-face meetings. More and more

companies were introducing remote work. Honestly, I sometimes struggled to stay motivated to work while living overseas.

Among the activity restrictions, the ban on dining inside restaurants hit me particularly hard as an expatriate living alone. Since dining out is inexpensive in Thailand, I never cooked. I usually stopped by a restaurant for dinner after work, but the restrictions prevented me from doing so. Fortunately, I was able to easily adapt to the situation as takeout and delivery services became rapidly available. Once I got used to it, I used apps to try restaurants and dishes I had never visited or heard of before. Despite the constraints, I found myself enjoying these new discoveries in my daily life.

I didn't have anything to do on the weekends, and it was unproductive to stay home all day. So, I decided to walk around the city during the day. I thought I should avoid places where people might gather. In reality, though, this worry was unnecessary.

The shopping malls and large, tourist temples, which were usually crowded, were all closed. Everywhere I went was deserted. However, I unexpectedly enjoyed finding something new when walking along routes I had usually traveled by car or train. As I walked through famous tourist destinations, as well as local markets and residential areas, I experienced how the Thai people live. When I came across a monument or copper statue, I researched the historical background of the place, which gave me an opportunity to deepen my understanding of Thailand (Photo 11).



Photo 11 Giant elephant at the Erawan Museum

3.6 Recovery After the End of the Pandemic

Following the declaration of the state of emergency, we experienced repeated cycles of restrictions and relaxations on our activities, which caused our spirits to rise and fall with each change. In the second half of 2022, the pandemic finally ended. Restrictions on entry from foreign countries were lifted, allowing for free movement similar to the pre-pandemic era. Many foreign tourists returned to Thailand, a popular tourist destination. Bangkok was packed with tourists from China and India, brimming with unprecedented vitality.

After the activity regulations were lifted, I visited tourist attractions throughout Thailand. As a Buddhist country, Thailand has temples everywhere. I was particularly impressed by the reclining Buddha statue at Wat Pho in Bangkok, one of Thailand's three major temples. The statue depicts the Buddha (Shakyamuni) in his final moments before death after achieving enlightenment. The entire statue is covered in gold leaf and measures 15 meters high and 46 meters long. It is a magnificent statue on a grand scale (Photo 12). The soles of his feet feature 108 paintings that represent the worldview of Thai Buddhism, created using the raden technique (inlaying patterns with polished shell fragments). They were quite impactful (Photo 13). Incidentally, the model for the reclining Buddha statue that appears in a certain video game I remember from long ago actually exists in Ayutthaya, the old royal capital located a short distance from Bangkok. When I visited, the statue wasn't quite as grand as the reclining Buddha in Bangkok, but I could still sense the worldview it represents.



Photo 12 Reclining Buddha at Wat Pho

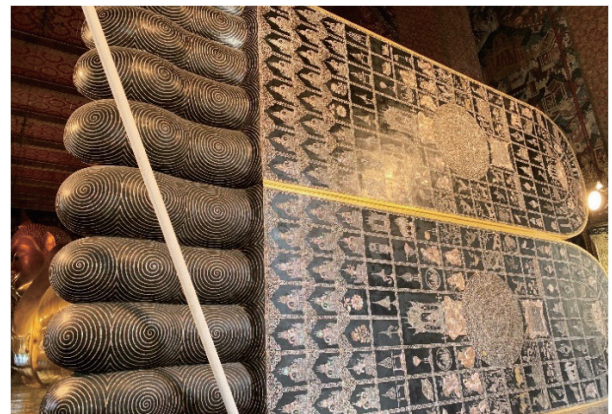


Photo 13 Raden work on the soles of the feet

I also took part in the Songkran water festival, which celebrates Thailand's traditional New Year. The festival is held annually in mid-April, which is the hottest time of year in the country. It is widely known as a unique festival where people splash water on each other throughout the nation to celebrate the new year. During the festival time, Bangkok is packed with travelers from around the world. The main streets turn into exciting, round-the-clock water festival sites where people carry water guns and buckets to splash water on each other.

I was impressed by how joyful the Thai people were as they celebrated the New Year, wishing for an end to the pandemic and a full recovery. This was especially notable since the festival had been suspended for a long time due to the pandemic. During the last Songkran I participated in before leaving Thailand, I got splashed with a lot of water (not so hygienic), and I ended up

feeling unwell for several days. Even that has become a fond memory now.

4. In Closing

In hindsight, my four years as an expatriate in Thailand went by quickly. I was able to complete it without any problems thanks to the support of many people. I would like to take this opportunity to express my appreciation and gratitude to the expatriates and local staff at the ASEAN bases, the individuals in Japan who were involved, and my family, who supported me throughout my assignment. Although I encountered various difficulties during my time overseas, particularly during the pandemic, I will leverage these experiences in my future work and contribute to the company. I am grateful for this opportunity and appreciate the chance to share my experiences.

Author



KAWABE Toshiharu

Joined the company in 2008.
 Engineering Dept., SA
 Headquarters, Automotive
 Components Operations.
 Taken present post after working
 as a transferred employee at
 Toyota Motor Corporation and as
 an expatriate at KAP.
 Engaged in design of automotive
 shock absorbers.