

The Peculiarities of Thai Plumbing Procedures

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The Guest House I stayed at in Chiang Mai, for the first week of my trip to Thailand this autumn, was undergoing renovation. I wondered if they were actually open at first. When I arrived, there were bags of cement filling the reception area. I knew that this meant there was likely to be plenty of “Fawltly Towers” opportunities, given the chaotic way these kinds of projects are undertaken in Thailand. Little did I know the full extent of the bizarre plumbing experiences I would experience over the next few days!

I asked for a “hong phatlom” or room with fan, room 204, as I do not like air conditioning. The hong phatlom costs 200 baht per night, and I was staying for a week, so they gave me a 10% discount. However, the air con rooms are 400 baht per night, and I discovered that they were upgrading all the rooms, and would not be offering hong phatlom any more. I saw two Thai couples leaving just as I arrived, so I was the only guest. It felt like the rats had left the sinking ship, but I was not clued into all the reasons for abandoning the ship.

The first morning the shower would not stop dripping, so I told the owner, and he had it fixed. The next problem was, hardly any water came out of the shower. The next morning I woke up to the sounds of demolition. I had my shower, which was running slow and at a cold temperature, and started to get ready. The owner then came to my room, and asked me to move to another room. He took the fan upstairs to room 301, saying I was getting an air con quality room but he would not charge me more. The air con remote control was not there, and the TV had been taken out, so it was fine for me. The room had a nicer view than room 204, which was right above a neighboring family, who woke up at 6am and made lots of loud bathroom noises (flatulence was timed to the minute).



room 301

The new room had two towels, toilet paper, and little soaps. All seemed fine. I went downstairs and saw that after about 10 minutes room 204 was a building site – the big window on the inside wall was removed, and there was dust everywhere.

The next day I went into the bathroom to have a shower. I turned on the hot water. At first the water came out hot, so I decided to let it run for a while to settle down. Then the hot water stopped running, even though the tap was fully on. I tried the cold water but only a trickle came out. Then there was an alarming hissing and shaking of the pipes. This carried on for a few minutes, and then there was a big bang!!! The plastic shower pipe exploded off the connector, and the bathroom started to fill with very hot steam. Nasty black hot oily water came out of the shower connector, so I jumped back. The hissing continued. I soon discovered that the hot tap for the shower was boiling hot. With the cold tap turned on, a stream of very hot gurgling water eventually came out. The banging of the taps continued unabated. I think the thermostat for the boiler had been set on maximum, and there was air getting into the pipes where the workers were fitting new showers. Being adventurous, I left the water and steam running for a while. At least I had an unexpected steam sauna. Then I tried turning off both taps, but the steam ominously continued to hiss out of the shower pipe connector. About half an hour later, the steam eventually died down. It was just like being in a Pink Panther movie, although I was not relishing the idea of playing (Chief) Inspector Clouseau.



the exploding shower fitting

I reported that the shower had a problem, and left my key for the builder. When I returned, the plastic pipe was reattached, and everything looked normal. My next shower was completely cold, but missing the explosive element, so that was welcome! The following days were ones of various permutations of very little water coming out of the shower very hot, and cold water. I knew it was a Buddhist plot to make sure I kept my equanimity, and so I went with the flow (so to speak).

Another exciting feature of the renovated bathrooms was the header tank for the new toilets. Each time I flushed the toilet in room 204, it kept running. I opened the tank up, and discovered that the flapper valve was not closing. After a few attempts, I saw that there was a superfluous miniature float on the flapper valve. I had never seen one of these

before; it must be a special Thai innovation. A quick jab of the handle allowed the tank to fill up normally, but I wonder how much water will be lost due to this exciting feature over its lifetime?



bogus design feature – flapper valve float

The toilet in room 301 had a larger version of the same toilet, and in that one the flapper valve float was innocuous.

The water to the bathroom sink, toilet, and cleaning hose were run from the same pipe, which must have been quite blocked up. It took about five minutes to fill the toilet tank, and while that was happening absolutely no water came out of the tap. I soon learned I needed to wash my hands before flushing the toilet, although I did keep forgetting this new requirement!

Another design feature, which is absolutely standard (and may be in the building codes if there were such a thing in Thailand), is that the toilet paper holder must be placed directly under the shower. It is also necessary to have no bar to hold the toilet roll in the holder, even if you wanted to use it. I assume that the builders throw them out when they install the holder. Furthermore, the toilet paper is out of reach of anyone sitting on the toilet.



bogus design feature – toilet paper holder directly under shower

The benefit of this design is that it reminds foreigners that they are sitting on a Thai toilet. To keep the toilet paper dry, it needs to be stored outside the bathroom, a slightly unusual proposition.



surplus computer desk

As part of the renovation, there were new desks in each room. I wondered about the shape of the desk, and then realized that the desk was designed for a computer. I assume they were good value compared with a normal desk. The drawer was locked, with no key, just to keep things simple and unusable.



hi tech key holder – note light switch position

I think that the owner must have been very pleased with the new solution to guests leaving the fan, air con or lights on when they left the room. The keys now had a tag with a magnet built in, which only activated the power in the room when the key was inserted in the holder (luckily the idea of a fridge in the room is still far on the horizon). I was very impressed, until I wanted to switch the light on and off. The electrician had carefully placed the key tag holder so that it maximally obscured the light switch, making it awkward to turn on and off. I checked, and all the rooms I saw had the key tag holder in the same place. I expect it looked aesthetically pleasing to have the holder directly below the light switch, instead of at the same level as the air con remote control. It was also a masterpiece of frugality to keep the dirty old light switch covers; that must have saved about 20 baht (50c) per room.

As a reward for being the only guest, I was given two new towels a day, as well as two extra rolls of toilet paper. My towel collection peaked at five, and then dwindled, as I got closer to my departure.

I had been wondering if I would have anything funny to write about this trip, but as you can see I was already richly rewarded in my first week!