

Adventure • Asia

Dream weaver

From Bangkok's heady byways to the misty Malaysian highlands, pick up the trail of Jim Thompson and plunge into one of the world's greatest unsolved mysteries

WORDS • STU LLOYD



From the top: The Authors' Lounge in the Oriental Hotel, Bangkok; Constable Idayati and Corporal Khairul standing outside the Tanah Rata police station

Even the most zealous scriptwriter in Hollywood, hammering at his keyboard and living off coffee and cigarettes, would struggle to dream up a more evocative script: CIA intrigue, the exotic East, political skullduggery, A-list dinner guests, millions made, and the *coup de grace* – a sudden disappearance. “Absolute mysteries only improve with age,” says William Warren, author of *Jim Thompson: The Unsolved Mystery*. “And there can have been few as absolute as Thompson’s has proved to be.”

Although he would later reap renown as the man who single-handedly revived Thailand’s silk and textile industries in the 1950’s and 1960’s, James HW Thompson first arrived in Thailand as a military intelligence officer with the OSS (the fore-runner of the CIA) at the end of the Second World War. Upon discharge, he was divorced by his wife who had no desire for a life in Southeast Asia. The former Delaware architect then turned his hand to revamping the fabled Oriental Hotel in Bangkok, which had suffered damage and neglect under the Japanese occupation. By the time this partnership soured, Thompson had become so inspired by Thailand’s rich, exotic, hand-woven silks, that he set about reviving its lacklustre cottage industry. His skill

as a designer and textile colourist was noted by fashion editors such as *Vogue*’s Diana Vreeland, and, when *Ben Hur* and *The King and I* disported Thompson’s creations, his silk empire was off and spinning.

But Thompson didn’t have long to enjoy the dream he’d woven. On 26 March 1967, he was visiting some friends at the Moonlight Cottage in the Cameron Highlands, Malaysia. Following a picnic on the Mount Brinchang, the party went back to enjoy a siesta, and... he simply vanished into, well, thin air.

I’m breathing hard, partly from the fine air at 2,000 metres and partly from anticipation, when I attempt to pick up Thompson’s trail in the highlands, where hopeful operators have tagged his name to tearooms, dining terraces and even interpretative walking tours. “That’s *creepy*,” says henna-tattooed Satia, as we pull up in his superannuated Land Rover to a bold NO ENTRY sign at Moonlight Cottage. Indeed, the old colonial bungalow exudes a melancholic mien with Mount Brinchang looming behind it and the jungle closing in. The garden is a jubilee of bougainvilleas and trumpet flowers, and the gravel driveway down which Thompson’s footsteps were last heard crunching has now been tarred, otherwise, the house remains identical. Satia ▶





tries the door – locked. One at the rear is open, but the rooms yield nothing but workers' muddy boot prints.

Beyond the picket fence is wild, untamed jungle of the type Thompson underwent commando survival training in, dropping steeply down into a valley shrouded in oaks, laurels, cinnamon trees and rhododendrons. In *The Jungle is Neutral*, F Spencer Chapman mused: "Navigation in thick mountainous jungle is the most difficult in the world." An overgrown trail leads down to the Lutheran Mission where Thompson was last spotted. Satia's boss, Kali, knows someone who knows someone who is apparently the last one known to have seen him alive. "This is the man who murdered Jim Thompson," Satia laughs, as he introduces the silver haired Ruby Maniam in the town of Tanah Rata. Thompson would be horrified at the developments of the last two decades: hotels and high-rises litter the once-verdant hillsides – a mish-mash of mock Tudor monstrosities.

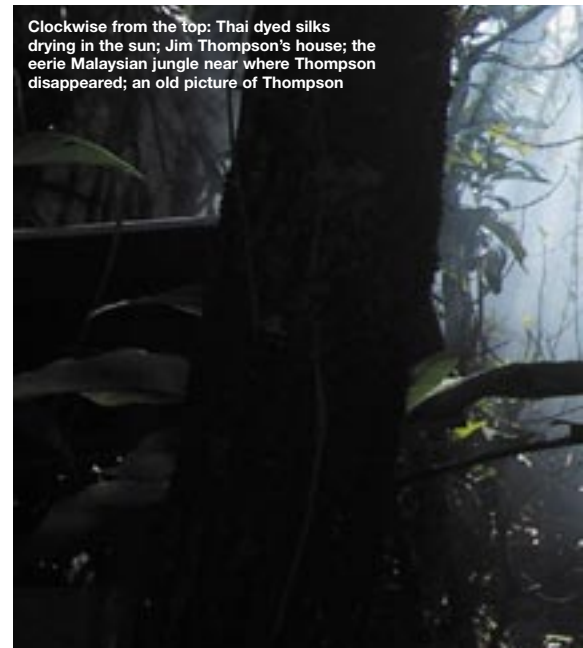
Ruby accompanies us to the Lutheran Mission. He was then a 17-year-old living at the mission, helping out his gardener friend. Weeding a flowerbed on Easter Sunday, he looked up to see "some guy, a little balding, walking slowly." He points to the driveway. "He hello to me, I hello to him." Ruby remembers a camera around his neck. "He was taking a photo of the nice view near the tennis court.

Maybe five or 10 minutes there. Then he turns and waves. Bye, see you. I see him come, I see him go." I show Ruby a picture of Thompson: "Yah, yah, that's him."

Search parties were scrambled, covering a 70-mile area of heavily jungled mountains. "So long they were searching," says Ruby. "Police, British and Malay soldiers, choppers. They say Jim Thompson has disappeared." A \$25,000 reward was posted. *Bomohs* (witchdoctors) and even nightclub-act mind readers joined the fruitless search. After 10 days, the operation was called off. The local chatter was of a tiger attack; Ruby had recently witnessed a tiger make off with a dog from this exact spot. "But if tiger attack him, something you can find..." Helen Robertson, whose husband supplied roses to the Moonlight Cottage, agrees. "There would be a belt buckle or shoes left over."

Theories abounded, many centred on his CIA connections and friendship with former Thai PM Pridi, who was exiled in China. There was also the Fine Arts Department who

Clockwise from the top: Thai dyed silks drying in the sun; Jim Thompson's house; the eerie Malaysian jungle near where Thompson disappeared; an old picture of Thompson



THE HOUSE THAT JIM BUILT

Such was Thompson's fastidious dedication to detail, that the finest carpenters were summoned from Ayudhya to reassemble the structures to build his Bangkok palace. The house is elevated one full storey above the ground on stilts, a practical precaution born of legendary monsoon storms. Its Thai architectural idiosyncrasies include openings that taper at the top, venting off the stifling tropical torpor. Walls that lean slightly inward and high "cathedral" ceilings serve to create an illusion of height and grace.

Inside, each doorway is crossed by a 15-inch plank step that serves two purposes: one, to stop babies crawling out into the canal; the other, to stop the ghosts said to travel along the floors. Thompson stamped his eclectic imprimatur throughout – black and white Italian tiles are teamed with his second passion, Chinese porcelain.

With carved teak gaming tables bearing the insignia of King Chulalongkorn, 18th century chandeliers and 17th century blue and white china plates, the dining room is perhaps the finest refection of Thompson's style. Nearby, the drawing room is decorated with paintings on cloth, paper and wood, and sculptures throughout cover an astonishing 14 centuries of Thai, Burmese and Cambodian history.

www.jimthompsonhouse.org

accused him of looting up-country temples. This cut deeply as Thompson saw himself as a guardian of the arts and antiquities. He wrote the Siam Society – which stood to inherit his house, land, company shares and collections – out of his will.

Others believed he was mistakenly shot by an errant *orang asli* (indigenous tribe) blow-dart. Then, within six months, his elderly sister was murdered in America.

"During the summer of 1967, the case was punctuated by false alarms, mystical visions, further theorising and events that must be classified as simply inexplicable, or at any rate more than passing strange," writes Warren.

Investigators liked a communist kidnapping plot, with terrorists active throughout the 450 square kilometres of the Cameron Highlands until their surrender in 1989. There were

reported sightings of Thompson in Canton, Laos, even Tahiti, but in 1974 Thompson was declared dead in the US and Thailand.

We present ourselves at the 1928 Tanah Rata police station, the centre of the biggest manhunt in Malaysia to date. In broken Malay, I ask what they know about Jim Thompson. "Jeem ...Thompson...?" Corporal Khairul and Constable Idayati exchange quizzical glances. I show them the cover of Warren's book. "Don't know, we are all new here." Through Satia, I ask if the case is still open. Khairul dials the phone. Investigating officers Musa and Azmi are still on the force, though posted elsewhere. "Buka!" he exclaims. Open! "Missing in action." The file is still here.

Two or three people go missing each year in the misty highlands, Idayati informs me, but they usually turn up after the same



number of days once the *orang asli* trackers are sent out. That no one else has ever gone completely, irretrievably, missing, adds a chilling piquancy to this cold case. "Aliens!" surmises Satia.

It's anything but cold when I arrive in Bangkok, with the summer swelter in full force. I pick up Thompson's trail once more in a half-acre oasis of golden bamboo, ficus trees and flowering bananas tucked away down an otherwise non-descript street. Here, an impossibly elegant guide, dressed in one of Thompson's creations of crimson and gold silk, greets me with a reverent *wai* gesture.

Opposite Thompson's weaving village in Ban Krua was the land he'd always fancied; formerly part of a summer palace compound that bordered the *klong* (canal). He chose to build his house there, which is now a draw card in a city with a royal flush of attractions. For this was no ordinary house. Six traditional Thai teak houses, some centuries old, were seamlessly coupled – their craftsmanship and permanence captivated Thompson. The houses were dismantled, stacked on barges and brought by river from the ancient capital, Ayudhya, to the construction site. Early in the





From above: Ruby Maniam, the last person to see Jim Thompson alive; tiny cups of Thai tea

EXPERIENCE JIM THOMPSON'S ASIA

FOR CULTURE: Boh Tea Plantations

Since 1929, the Russell family from Scotland has been the largest producer of tea in Malaysia, with 4,000 acres under cultivation in the highlands alone. These plantations cover the mountains like geometrical green carpets, and you can enjoy a tour of their factory at Sungei Palas to sample some fresh brews and find out how these premium black teas are grown, picked and packed.

FOR EATING: Jim Thompson Tea Room

The time-honoured tradition of high tea is popular in the highlands, and few places are more classy or relevant than Jim Thompson's Tea Room. In English colonial surrounds, savour home baked scones and fresh Cameronian strawberries as you contemplate the golf course near the place where Thompson disappeared. www.cameronhighlandsresort.com

FOR SHOPPING: The Thai Silk Company

Thailand boasts 25 Jim Thompson silk shops and Malaysia five, where you, too, can purchase the fabrics and garments that made this company one of the greatest success stories of post-war Asia. www.jimthompson.com

FOR SLEEPING: The Smokehouse

Established by eccentric British Colonel Jack Foster in 1939, the Smokehouse is one of Malaysia's original guesthouses. You can still experience the charm of the highlands as a colonial hill station here. In Tudor style, the hunting lodge offers a yesteryear atmosphere, with a warm welcome and crackling fireplaces. www.thesmokehouse.com.my

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spring of 1959, on a day deemed auspicious by a Buddhist geomancer, Thompson officially moved into his new home.

The great *farang* (foreigner) house was an instant Bangkok landmark: a letter addressed simply to "Jim Thompson, Bangkok" found its way to him. Barbara Hutton, Senator William Fulbright and Truman Capote were among his star-spangled guests. Even Somerset Maugham waxed lyrical on his final Asian swing-through. His thank you note read: "You have not only beautiful things; what is most rare is that you have arranged them with faultless taste." Only Thompson could have combined European, Chinese and Thai elements with such panache.

His house now presents like the *Marie Celeste*, just as he left it. I half expect to find Thompson reading at his study desk. "He attracted such a large assortment of stories," says Warren, "that it was probably inevitable that the process would not only go on after he vanished but be accelerated, unhindered by troublesome facts."

My head is a rich tapestry of emotions. Forty years have shed no further light on this mystery. Indeed, forget Hollywood's finest scriptwriters, the only thing with more twists and turns than Jim Thompson's story is the old Tapah Road up to the highlands. ■

ETIHAD AIRWAYS FLIES TO BOTH BANGKOK AND KUALA LUMPUR