

A Walk in the Jungle

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The Cameron Highlands of Malaysia, 140 miles north of Kuala Lumpur at an elevation of 5,000 ft., is one of Southeast Asia's most fetching health resorts. Its climate is mild by day and cool by night, and its lush vegetation includes thick jungles, clouds of brilliant flowers and mile after mile of tea plantations. There last week on vacation went one of Southeast Asia's best-known businessmen, American James Thompson, 61. Tired from a round of business, which included the opening in Bangkok three weeks ago of a new, two-story headquarters for his \$1.5 million-a-year silk business, Thompson came to the Highlands as the guest of Dr. and Mrs. T. G. Ling of Singapore.

A resident of Thailand since 1946, Thompson had almost singlehandedly made Thai silk and its shimmering colors world-renowned, and thus created a major export asset for the grateful Thais. But Thompson was more than a businessman; he was also a collector of Oriental objets d'art who filled his opulent Bangkok home with priceless porcelains and religious figures. He loved to roam through the jungle, searching for old ruins and occasionally kicking up a Buddha's head. One afternoon last week, when his hosts had retired to rest, he left their house without a word and went for a walk into the jungle. This time, Jim Thompson did not return.

Massive Manhunt. Alarmed when he did not show up by dark, the Lings called the police, who launched the most massive manhunt ever seen in the Malayan mountains. Some 300 soldiers and police using tracker dogs fanned out through the jungle. Helicopters swooped over the treetops. The searchers were soon joined by 30 aboriginal tribesmen of the area, through which both tigers and bandits are known to roam. Back in Bangkok, a Portuguese Jesuit brother with a reputation for clairvoyance picked out a likely spot on a map, and the commander of U.S. Army Support in Thailand, Brigadier General Edwin F. Black, flew off to Malaysia with it in the distant hope that it might help. Even a local witch doctor tried, and failed, to divine Thompson's whereabouts.

Thompson's friends and Malaysian officials at first suspected—even hoped, as the least of several evils—that he had been captured by local bandits, who sometimes seize Chinese merchants for ransom. But offers of substantial rewards, printed in local newspapers, failed to produce any response. Thompson was accustomed to the jungle, but the forest around Cameron Highlands is so thick and its trails so numerous and meandering that local authorities estimated that it would take a full regiment of men working for about a month to comb the area. The only clue came from a cook in a Lutheran-mission bungalow, who said that she had seen Thompson standing on a nearby plateau for about 30 minutes. Then, she reported, "suddenly he disappeared." By week's end, no trace of him had been found.

Seven Teak Houses. The scope and intensity of last week's search showed the respect and affection that Southeast Asia felt for Jim Thompson. A Princetonian from Greenville, Del., Thompson was an architect when World War II began. He went to Asia as an agent of the Office of Strategic Services, liked the area so well that he stayed on when the war ended. Fascinated by the silk spinners he saw when traveling in rural Thailand, he collected samples of their work in a suitcase, brought them to New York and persuaded fashion designers to use them. He went back to Thailand, started his business with \$700 and contracted with the dying silk industry, whose 200 scattered weavers worked on ancient handlooms, to turn out fine silks that he stamped in brilliant colors and designs. His success inspired some 130 competitors, eventually produced thousands of jobs for the Thais.

Divorced in 1946 and never remarried, Jim Thompson entertained lavishly and often at his Bangkok home, created out of seven traditional Siamese teak houses. He never tired of showing visitors his collection of ancient Buddhas, Thai paintings and blue and white Oriental porcelains, opened his house to a twice-weekly tour whose proceeds he gave to charity. His will leaves his house and its treasures to his family in the U.S. But Jim Thompson, whether or not he survives his walk in the jungle, has left the Thais an even more priceless gift: a pride in Thai craftsmanship, announced around the world in banners of the iridescent silks that he made famous.

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