

## Finding what you're not looking for. . .

Mengla was intended to be a just a brief stop over on the way to Laos I had rather low expectations after reading the description in the guidebook. The highlight is the road to the town about 50 km from the Chinese border with Laos. And the road was very nice, winding along mountains, through jungle, and past rivers and streams. Arriving in Mengla I found the guidebooks description of a long homogenous strip of concrete buildings lined with shops and stalls to be far too accurate. A significant number of which appeared to be brothels judging by the pink lighting and suggestive posters in the couch filled entryways. It seems the town caters to Chinese truckers who drive up from Southeast Asia. In addition to the usual toiletries in my hotel room was a condom. At least there is some attempt at fighting AIDS which is especially rampant in southern Yunnan.

I arrived with some daylight left and not wanting to play Russian roulette at one of the brothels I walked out south of town towards what was Mengla's one point of interest: a pagoda apparently 2 km south of town on the river. I walked for about 45 minutes out of town but never saw a pagoda. It was not a very pleasant walk either, lots of traffic and an all too frequent stench of raw sewage. I was cursing the guidebook and was almost about to turn around and hail a bus to get back into town, when I spotted a Dai village across a bridge on the other side of the river. I hesitated for a second, very close to throwing in the towel, and then convinced myself to go poke around in the village. You never know what can happen, and at least it gave me some destination at the end of this miserable walk. As I was walking through village I saw a number of women dressed in colorful very Thai looking dresses. It apparent something was going on either that or these



**Condom along with standard toiletries in my hotel in Mengla.**



**Me drinking and eating with the Dai.**

villagers just hang out in their Sunday best. I walked buy a house where there were a lot of people going in and out and there was a group of men and women sitting below the stairway to the house. It was one of the nicer Dai houses I've seen. Built in the elevated Dai style but very modern in every other sense. It seemed this village was doing fairly well for itself, likely from border trade (legal or otherwise). In any case they motioned for me to sit down. I obliged interested in finding out what the occasion was. While no one spoke a word of English I was able to determine that it was either an engagement or wedding party for the daughter of the man who owned this house. We also were able to establish my age, the others respective ages, that I was an American, and single. The men kept motioning that I should marry one of the girls in the village, pointing out each one as they passed. My mom no doubt wouldn't have minded if I took them up on it, at this point. I gathered they had had a few drinks. I was offered Dai food which it seems was left over from the party including "sticky rice" which as its name implies sticks together and you eat it with your hands, as well as the local beer. I was thankful it wasn't bi-jo this time. I stayed for about an hour drinking and eating with them, but it was getting dark and I had to make sure I could get back to town so I thanked them and said goodbye with the little Chinese that I do know and fortunately caught a bus back into town. It was another great time that almost didn't happen, and a fun last night in China, for a while anyway.



**Me drinking and eating with the Dai.**