

An independent traveller's journal

#1 - Spring 2012

INDOCHINE

The Andaman Sea

-Liveaboard and diving courses

Thailand

-Monarchs, markets and mansions

Cambodia

-Shaking off the heritage of the Khmer Rouge

Vietnam

-It's a country, not a war

Laos

-In the tubing!

The Backpacks

-This year's winners of the prestigious Backpack Awards





Priority Seat

ที่นั่งสำรองบุคคลพิเศษ

老弱病残专座 优先席



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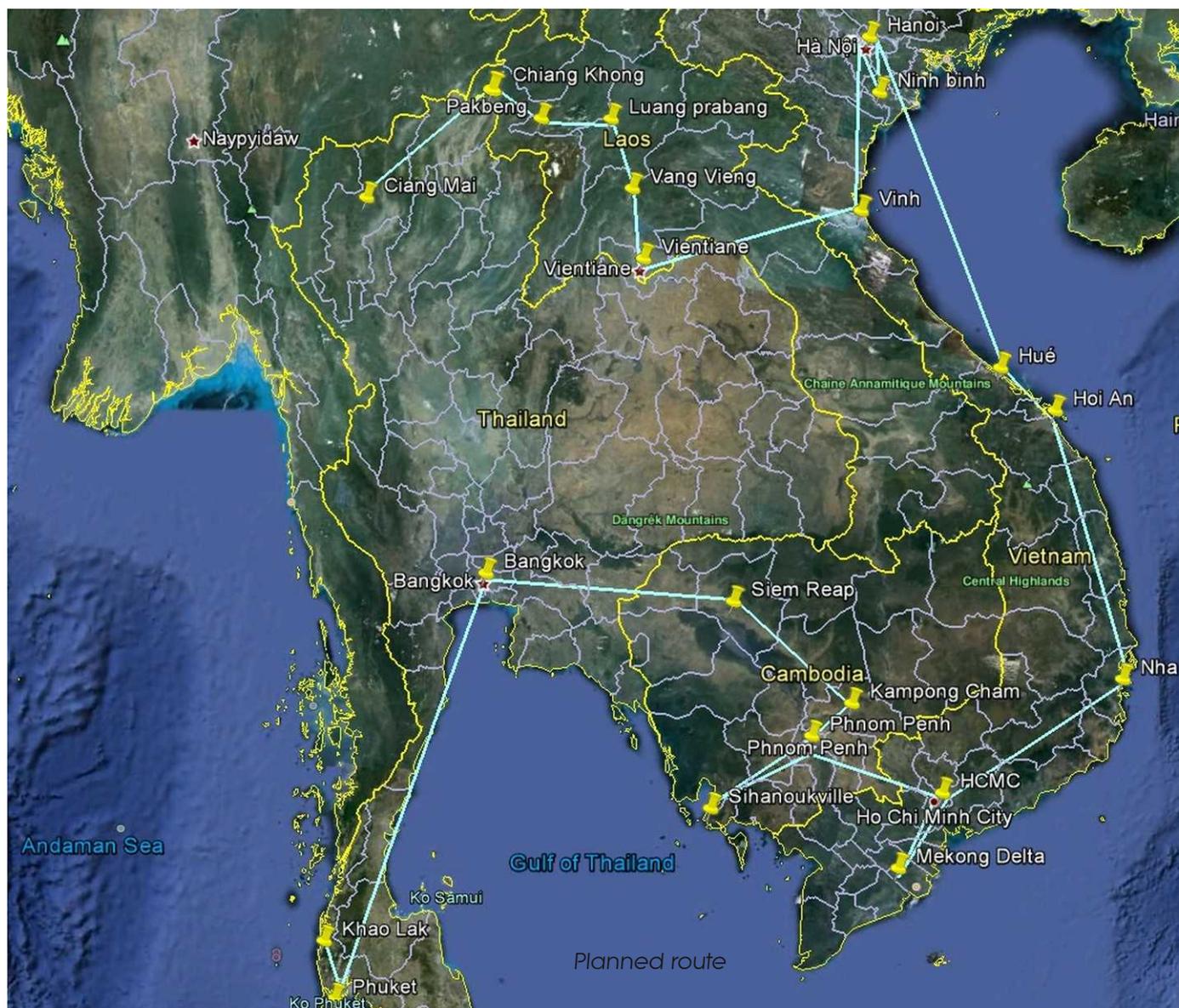
Asia. The largest continent, yet the hitherto least explored. By me, that is. I hardly think one week in Israel and one impromptu half-day in Singapore counts, so this time I went to Asia in-depth. And I mean that literally: The first country to be visited was the land of smiles, Thailand. Even though it has a lot to offer and even more that I didn't yet know of, one of its finest assets is undoubtedly that Thailand is a diving paradise on earth. And dove I did!

And who am I? Well, I'm first and foremost a culture-nerdy civil engineer with a sharp backhand, but somehow I find it necessary to get away and see the world ever so often. See? Nay, experience it; and share those experiences. Through words and photos and amateurishly (graphically and linguistically) botched traveller's journals I tell anybody who listens about my globe-trotting.

After Australia, New Zealand, Southern and Eastern Africa, North America and the Andes and jungles of South America, I finally found myself in Asia proper.

MARTIN

Going down



DIVING

My tour starts in Khao Lak, for a liveboard to the Similan Islands. As the arranging company, Sea-dragon, describes it:

"Similan Islands & Koh Bon - 3 day / 2 night

Our unique fun boat, the only liveboard boat specifically catering to travellers or those of you on a budget, offers lots of good diving, good food & good company at a very affordable price. With only eight customers onboard, supervised by two professional dive staff, we are able to offer a very personalised trip and friendly service with the emphasis on safety, good food and diving, diving, diving... During the trip there is plenty of time for visiting the different beaches and exploring the islands, including the chance to climb to the top of the famous rock formation at Ao Guerk for beautiful views over the bay, or visit the National Park Headquarters on Koh

Miang. Enjoy the diverse diving of the Similans, from the extensive coral reefs to the canyons and gullies formed by underwater granite boulders with numerous swimthroughs. Also you will make a dive along the near vertical slope of Koh Bon - the only true wall dive in this area, and keep a careful watch for the manta rays, often seen playing in the waters near this island. And in the evening, relax on our open-air sundeck. With no air-conditioning onboard and therefore no generator running at night, the Nangnuan is one of the last boats in the islands offering total peace and quiet. Bring along your guitar - this is the perfect setting for those lazy tropical evenings."

As if this wasn't enough, I will also take an upgrade course to become an Advanced Open Water Diver.

PHOTOGRAPHY

I distinctly remember one of my first thoughts during my very first long journey. After a dive trip to the Great Barrier Reef in November 2005 I said to myself, 'Next trip I'm bringing an under water case for my camera!'. Well, I didn't. More than six years later I finally found what I was looking for. A priceworthy case that took one incompetent shipping company and roughly six weeks to reach me.

As if that wasn't enough, the only compatible camera have been off the market a couple of years, so I had to peruse the used items sales sites. But at long last, I had the full set: A Canon Ixus 80 and its compatible 40 metres waterproof case. And I bought a new DSLR, as well, 'cause, y'know, I like photography.



OVERLANDING

Eventually I intend to bus myself to Bangkok, from which I will embark on an overlanding tour lasting nearly six weeks, including visits to Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam.

According to Intrepid Travel, I can expect to bargain like a local in Bangkok's markets, see the temples of Angkor rise out of the jungle, delve into Khmer history in Phnom Penh, experience rural village life at a Cambodian homestay, explore Sihanoukville's tropical surrounds, relax on Nha Trang's beaches, stroll the atmospheric streets of Hoi An, wander through Hanoi's Old Quarter, admire the stunning limestone crags around Vang Vieng and take a riverboat cruise on the Mekong.

After which I will finally be heading back into Thailand, to finish in Chiang Mai, high up in the north, and high up in the mountains.

But first, we go down. 30 meters down.



Wet paradise

My own private bungalow, a stone throw away from the pristine beaches of Khao Lak on the Andaman coast in the Southwest of Thailand. That was where I woke up on that fine Sunday morning. But it had been quite an effort to get there. The ride to the airport went fine, as my dad was kind enough to drive me there, and the flight to München was no hassle*, but Thai Airways left a bit to desire. My choice of food was out, and I had to settle for a less than tasty fish. The cutlery was filthy, and whenever the cabin crew went by they swooshed past, hardly making any effort to make sure we got what we wanted. And on a 10,5 hour flight, you need to fill up on liquids.

You also need some on-flight entertainment, and while they did have a decent choice, the quality of the picture was like a corrupt DivX-file from the 1900's and the audio was there maximum 75 % of the time. As if that wasn't enough, the passenger behind me kept insisting, in German no less, that I had my seat all vertical-like (which, I suppose, is hardly Thai Airways' fault) and the overhead compartment was reserved for the crew's gear, forcing my well-filled dayback to the seat in front of me, leaving my leg room far, far behind.

With a short, intermittant and shallow night's sleep, I made it to Bangkok Suvarnahabhumi, and spent six hours there, awaiting my connection flight. Eventually I boarded the plane to Phuket, got picked up in the pouring rain at the airport and driven to my home for the next few days: My own private bungalow, a stone throw away from the pristine be-

Dragonfish



Safety stop with photo op

School of fish seeking shelter behind a rock



*) And, presumably, no Hoff



Amanda adjusting her mask



Cheer up, Moray!



OK!

aches of Khao Lak on the Andaman coast in the Southwest of Thailand.

As I woke up the next morning, it was still cloudy, but the rain had mostly stopped. Not that it would matter much, though, as I planned on spending a significant time in the water anyways. I took my Scuba refresher course, in which I repeated the exercises I learnt 12 years ago, when I took my Open Water certificate: Bouyancy control, taking off and on the mask, aiding my buddy with air, being aided by my buddy with air, taking off and on the BCD and so forth, and so on.

It was a good refresher, and a much needed tune-up for my upcoming Advanced course and my liveboard trip. After my practise dive, I took a simple dive around the reef, just for shits and giggles, and also to test my spanking new UW-case. It seemed to be working just fine, and with that my Indochine 2012 tour had begun for real.

Scuba up, Ted!

The facts were these:

KHAO LAK is a seaside resort located in the Takua Pa district in the Phang Nga province, Thailand and popular as a departure point for liveboard scuba diving trips to the Similan Islands. Located approximately 60 kilometers north of the island of Phuket along Phetkasem Road, Khao Lak is serviced regularly by bus and taxi services. Phuket International Airport (HKT) is situated 74 kilometers south on the island of Phuket. Though Thailand's economy is mostly export-dependent, Khao Lak remains mostly tourist-dependent, with surrounding agriculture and commercial fishing making up a small contribution to Thailand's overall economy.

Live and let dive

I made a promise to myself. My company offers a finders fee of sorts if you suggest someone that eventually becomes an employee. The finders fee is roughly equivalent to what an Advanced Open Water Diver course will cost, so I promised

Ah yes. Liveaboard. There were eight passengers, evenly spread amongst Germans and Americans (and one Swiss and one Swede) along with two divemasters. Cosy enough. We set sail for Koh Bon for our first dive, then continued to Similan Is-

cellent as well, with divemaster Roger balancing humorous briefings with a right degree of seriousness, delivered in a cartoonish German accent.

I evolved greatly as a diver during these dives, with aforementioned skills in buoyancy



M/V Nanguan, our liveaboard ship

myself that if the guy (a former colleague) I suggested were to get hired, I'd treat myself to an AOWD course while in Thailand. Well, he did, and so I am. I started with three specialty adventure dives: Peak performance buoyancy, Underwater navigation and Search & recovery. Especially the Peak performance buoyancy dive was incredibly helpful, as I learnt to improve my buoyancy control much better than before, which would be proven useful on my liveaboard trip the following days.

lands for the following dives (including, but not limited to, an awesome night dive).

The sheer awesomeness of these dives is too huge to put down in words, but a limited list of watery wildlife includes: Barracudas, tunas, corals, heaps and heaps of trevalys, snappers and groupas, morays of every possible colour and pattern, corals, lobster, shrimps, sea cucumbers, corals, trigger fish, angelfish, corals, turtles, clams, nudie snails, eels, starfish and a manta ray.

The group was kind of ex-

control, a much more efficient breathing technique and an ability to remain neutral at shallow depths even after having breathed most of my air, with much less added weight than before.

Every dive was, as is necessary, interspersed with sufficient surface time. The in-between-time was spent eating, relaxing, reading up on advanced diving, eating, snorkelling and eating. There was also time to visit some of the Similan Islands, trekking through the jungle, swimming and just chilling on

the alabaster white, soft sandy beaches.

The time went by quicker than one would hope, and soon M/V Nanguan steered off eastwards, and solid ground was once again underneath my feet. A final goodbye to my co-divers, and off I trotted to eat the spiciest Pad Thai yet.

As morning came, I walked the twenty steps from my hostel to Sea Dragon dive centre and got ready for my final two dives of AOWD course: Deep dive and wreck dive.

Without much effort I finished my deep dive (I have logged several dives deeper than the stipulated 22 metres I did on this day), and swam around the wreck of a former Dutch, then Greek mining vessel, noting the various hazards a wreck can present. Those would include sharp edges, ropes, aquatic life (nope, not the giant octopus guarding the treasure chest full of rubies, emeralds and gold doubloons, but rather poisonous lion- and stonefish), overhangs and suchlike. And when resurfacing, I

was a certified Advanced Open Water Diver!

Back in Khao Lak, I finished the paperwork, got my stuff together, and stood by the roadside for 30 minutes before flagging down a bus that eventually brought me and my backpacks to Phuket town. After some delicious Thais style kebabs at the night market I treated myself to a well-needed, bonecrushing and muscle tenderizing massage.



Sail Rock at Mu Koh in the Similans

The facts were these:

THE SIMILAN ISLANDS is a group of islands in the Andaman Sea off the coast of, and part of, Phang Nga Province, southern Thailand. It is a national park which was established in 1982.

Similan Islands National Park was established after a one-year exploration by the forestry department. The park is an archipelago consisting of nine islands named Ko Bon, Ko Bayu, Ko Similan, Ko Payu, Ko Miang (two adjoining islands), Ko Payan, Ko Payang, and Ko Huyong. Recently, the park was expanded to include two remote islands named Ko Bon and Ko Tachai. The Similans are situated 70 kilometres from Phang Nga town. "Similan" is a Yawi word which means "nine". Similan is one of the most famous diving sites in Thailand, and noted as one of the top ten dive destinations in the world according to the National Geographic Society.

Faites phi-phi ici

"The fool repeats his own mistakes;
the wise learns from them"
-old proverb, or a tradition, or an old
charter, or something



Well, the even wiserer learns from other people's mistakes, and so, hear ye hear ye:

-If you want to go snorkelling, do so in a beautiful, secluded area undisturbed by thousands of tourists currently also snorkelling there

-If you want to go snorkelling, do so in a place that hasn't been ruined by years and years of millions of thoughtless tourists touching the sensitive marine life, spewing their engine waste and littering

-If you want to go snorkelling, do so before you go scuba diving for six days in beautiful national parks. To go snorkelling after such a majestic experience is quite the anti-klimax.

-If you want to see the awesome rocks, beaches and jungles of Koh Phi Phi, do so in low season, and go there for a couple of days/nights; that way you can at least get a glimpse of how the place would look without the billions of daytripping tourists covering the place in mid-day

-If you want to experience the awesomest beach on Koh Phi Phi, get thee a time-machine and return to any year before the Leo DiCaprio film 'The Beach' was released before going there

In short, don't do a daytrip to Koh Phi Phi.



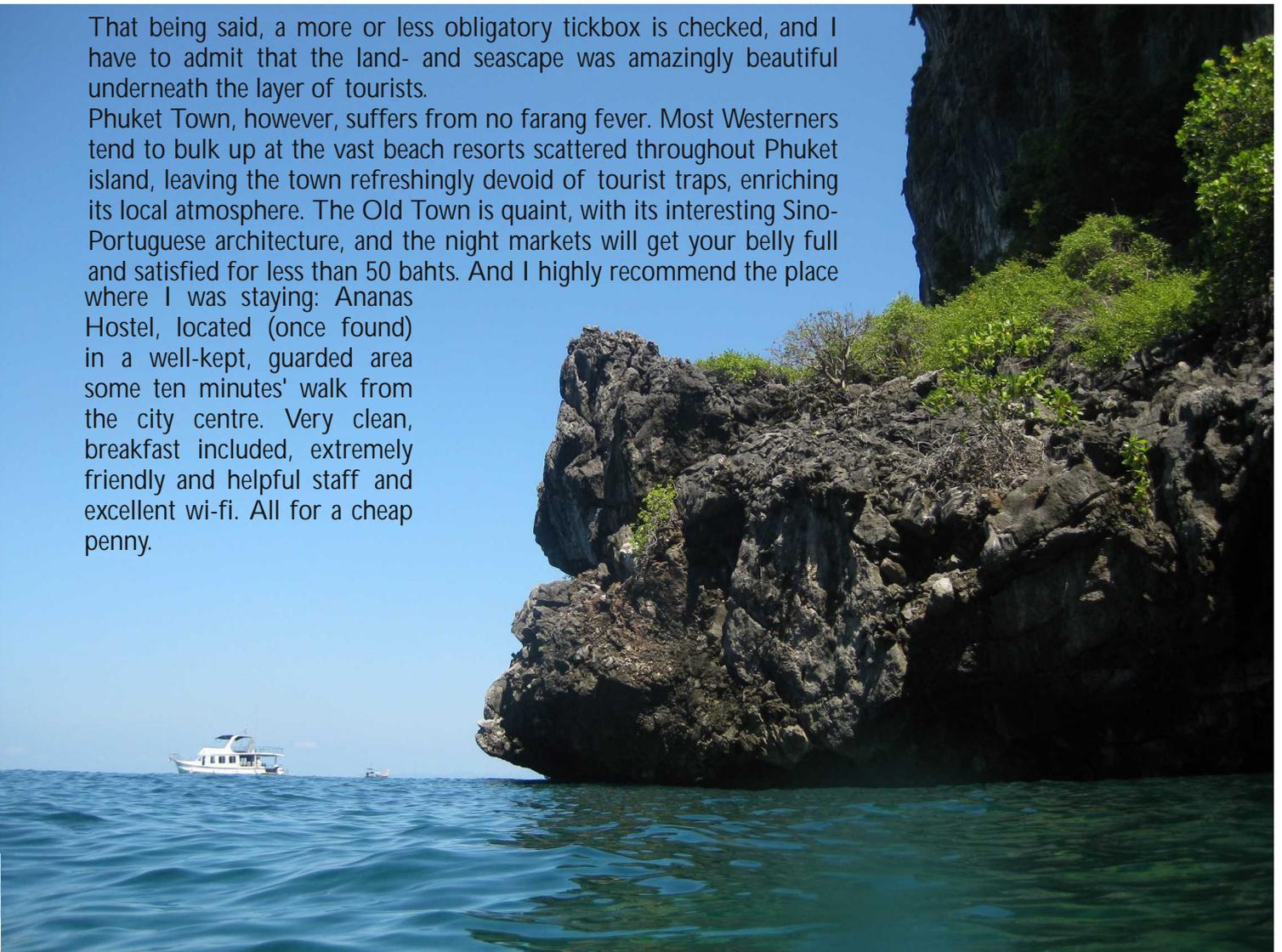
Place mint leaves and 1 lime wedge into a sturdy glass. Use a muddler to crush the mint and lime to release the mint oils and lime juice. Add 2 more lime wedges and the sugar, and muddle again to release the lime juice. Do not strain the mixture. Fill the glass almost to the top with ice. Pour the rum over the ice, and fill the glass with carbonated water. Stir, taste, and add more sugar if desired. Garnish with the remaining lime wedge.

Mojito:

1 g confectioners' sugar
0.5 lime, juiced
1 sprig fresh mint, crushed
120 ml crushed ice
60 ml white rum
115 ml carbonated water
1 sprig fresh mint, garnish

That being said, a more or less obligatory tickbox is checked, and I have to admit that the land- and seascape was amazingly beautiful underneath the layer of tourists.

Phuket Town, however, suffers from no farang fever. Most Westerners tend to bulk up at the vast beach resorts scattered throughout Phuket island, leaving the town refreshingly devoid of tourist traps, enriching its local atmosphere. The Old Town is quaint, with its interesting Sino-Portuguese architecture, and the night markets will get your belly full and satisfied for less than 50 bahts. And I highly recommend the place where I was staying: Ananas Hostel, located (once found) in a well-kept, guarded area some ten minutes' walk from the city centre. Very clean, breakfast included, extremely friendly and helpful staff and excellent wi-fi. All for a cheap penny.



The facts were these:

The PHI PHI ISLANDS are located in Thailand, between the large island of Phuket and the western Andaman Sea coast of the mainland. The islands are administratively part of Krabi province. Ko Phi Phi Don ("ko" meaning "island" in the Thai language) is the largest island of the group, and is the only island with permanent inhabitants, although the beaches of the second largest island, Ko Phi Phi Lee (or "Ko Phi Phi Leh"), are visited by many people as well. The rest of the islands in the group, including Bida Nok, Bida Noi, and Bamboo Island (Ko Mai Phai), are not much more than large limestone rocks jutting out of the sea.

Phi Phi Don was initially populated by Muslim fishermen during the late 1940s, and later became a coconut plantation. The Thai population of Phi Phi Don remains more than 80% Muslim. The actual population however, if counting laborers, especially from the north-east, from the mainland is much more Buddhist these days.

The islands came to worldwide prominence when Ko Phi Phi Leh was used as a location for the 2000 British-American film *The Beach*. This attracted criticism, with claims that the film company had damaged the island's environment, an accusation the film's makers contest. The film's release was attributed to an increase in tourism to the islands. Phi Phi Leh also houses the 'Viking Cave', from which there is a thriving bird's nest soup industry.



Bangkok, oriental setting

A busride to end all busrides. 13 hours it took, from Phuket to Bangkok, with two toilet breaks and one lunch stop along the way. But finally I made it to Thailand's latest capitol, and certainly the biggest and busiest: Bangkok.

For someone with a sucky sense of direction such as myself, the labyrinth* that is Bangkok can certainly pose a challenge; I'm slightly less forgiving when the local taxi drivers can't seem to find their way around the messy maze**. I had already given up the idea of perusing the streets on my very lonesome, and was booked and set for three different day tours.

I started with the floating markets at Damnoensaduk, which, touristy as they were, gave quite the local impression I was going for. Tiny, hardly seaworthy

longboats jam packed with merchandise such as vegetables, flowers, fish and trinkets floated noiselessly along the canals, their skippers trading with each other, the locals and, of course, the tourists. I wasn't really in a shopping mode, which I rarely am, but I did cough up a couple of hundred bahts for a sarong. A very manly sarong, mind you; no colourful flowers or hearts or any of that girly stuff. No, I bought myself a man sarong. A manrong, if you will. The afternoon was spent at the Rose Garden (although I didn't see a single rose), in which I enjoyed a cultural village show, including music, dancing, swordplay, thai boxing and a Thai wedding. Very interesting, indeed.



Traditionally clothed woman at Rose Garden cultural centre



Rose Garden cultural centre, harvest dance



Rose Garden cultural centre, the Coconut dance

*) Or is it a maze?

***) Or is it a labyrinth?

The floating markets at Damnoensaduk



Next up was a visit to the most wellknown, whistle-worthy bridge in Thailand: The bridge over the river Kwai. Walking through the war cemetery and the Death Railway museum, you got quite the feel of the tremendous horrors that the over 10 000 pris-

oners of war had to endure: Famine, disease, deprivation of sleep, hard labour and so on. After that it was kind of easy to forgive the rather shaky construction on the railway that took us halfway back to Bangkok.

Bridge on the River Kwai.
Envision the whistling!



And of course, no first visit to Bangkok is complete without visiting the wonderfully lavish*** Grand Palace, Wat Traimit (featuring the world's largest gold buddha) and Wat Poh (starring the world's largest reclining buddha). It was on and off with shoes all day long. Riddle me this, by the way: In buddhist temples you must take off your shoes (thereby exposing your feet, which are considered unclean) and your hat (thereby exposing your head, which is considered holy). At the same time, you're considered disrespectful if you don't cover your legs and your shoulders (because of, you know, every religion's perverse attitude towards anything even remotely sexual). Whats up with that? Inconsistency? You'd bet!

In between the daytrips I perused the streets of Bangkok (also known as Krung Thep, which is short for the city's full name, Krungthepmahanakhon Amornrattanakosin Mahinthalayutthaya Mahadilokphop Nopparat Ratchathaniburirom Udomratchaniwetmahasathan Amonphiman Awatansathit Sak-kathattiyawitsanukamprasit, roughly translated to The city of angels, the great city, the residence of the Emerald Buddha, the impregnable city (of Ayutthaya) of God Indra, the grand capital of the world endowed with nine precious gems, the happy city, abounding in an enormous Royal Palace that resembles the heavenly abode where reigns the reincarnated God, a city given by Indra and built by Vishnukarn). The smell, the noise, the intense traffic, the humid heat and the utter lack of urban planning all played part in making Bangkok quite the challenge for the lone traveller. And of course, that just makes the city even more exotic and interesting.



Buddhas: golden, emerald, in-a-row and reclining
All in Wat Trimit, Wat Phra Kaew, Ho Plueng Krueng and/or Wat Pho



At the busy, bustling, backpacker street of Khao San Road, the vendors were even more jam-packed than usual. They tried to sell me all kinds of goods and services, including, but not limited to, wooden frogs that sounded like frogs, zippos the size of a small backpack, massage with happy ending, Armani styled tailored suits, roasted insects and so forth. The only item I did purchase, though, was a pair of genuine**** Ray-Bans for B100, and with those, I headed to my hotel to meet my family for the next few weeks: It was time for pre departure meeting for my overlanding group.

Krungthep- mahanakhon

Amornratta- nakosin

Mahintha- rayutthaya

Mahadilokphop Nopparat

***) I'll rephrase that later, when I'm safely back home, and thus can't be charged for disrespecting the royal family...

****) They didn't have a certificate of authenticity, but surely they can't be counterfeit, right? In that case, the sunnies wouldn't say Ray-Ban, they'd say something like Ray-Han, or Bay-Ran, or Yar-Nab, or suchlike. Right? Right? Anyone? Bueller?

Grand Palace (or Phra Borom Maha Ratcha Wang)



The facts were these:

Bangkok is the capital city of, and by far the most densely populated city in Thailand with about 12 million people. Bangkok was a small trading post near the mouth of the Chao Phraya River during the Ayutthaya Kingdom in the 15th century. It eventually grew in size and became the site of two capital cities: Thonburi in 1768 and Rattanakosin in 1782.

Because of its strategic location in Southeast Asia, Siam (later Thailand) acted as a buffer-zone between the French and British colonial empires. Bangkok itself has gained a reputation as an independent, dynamic and influential city. Bangkok is the political, social and economic centre of Thailand, and one of the leading cities in Southeast Asia.

Due to the 1980s and 1990s Asian investment boom, many multinational corporations make their regional headquarters in Bangkok and the city is a regional force in finance and business. Its increasing influence on global politics, culture, fashion and entertainment underlines its status as an Alpha global city. In 2009, it was the second most expensive city in South-East Asia behind Singapore. The city's many cultural landmarks and attractions in addition to its nightlife venues has made it synonymous with exoticism. Its rapid modernization, reflected in the cityscape and the urban society, has left untouched the historic Grand Palace, Wat Arun, Vimanmek Palace Complex and hundreds of Buddhist temples draw about 10 million international visitors each year, second only to London.

Bangkok has an official population of 8,249,117 residents, while the greater Bangkok area contains some 14,565,520 (Census 2010). The capital is a center of the megalopolis of 20 million people, situated in a heavily urbanized triangle of central and eastern Thailand, which stretches from Nakhon Ratchasima to the heavily industrialized Eastern Seaboard. Bangkok borders five other provinces: Nonthaburi, Pathum Thani, Samut Prakan, Samut Sakhon and Nakhon Pathom; all five provinces are joined in the conurbation of the Bangkok Metropolitan Area. It is served by two international airports: Suvarnabhumi Airport and Don Mueang International Airport, four rapid transit lines operated by the BTS, MRT, and the SRT, with plans to add additional lines by 2020.



Sandra (and Chez in the distance) photographing Angkor Wat



Anchor steam

Border crossing! After a few hours on a conveniently sized minibus, we reached the border town of Poipet. And we were: Pommies Phil, Chris, Michael, Matt, Trevor and Valerie, Aussie/Pom Chez, American Kimberly, Swiss Isabelle and German Sandra, all lead enthusiastically by Cambodian girl Alann.

In Cambodia we soon reached the spacious and cosy, yet expanding town

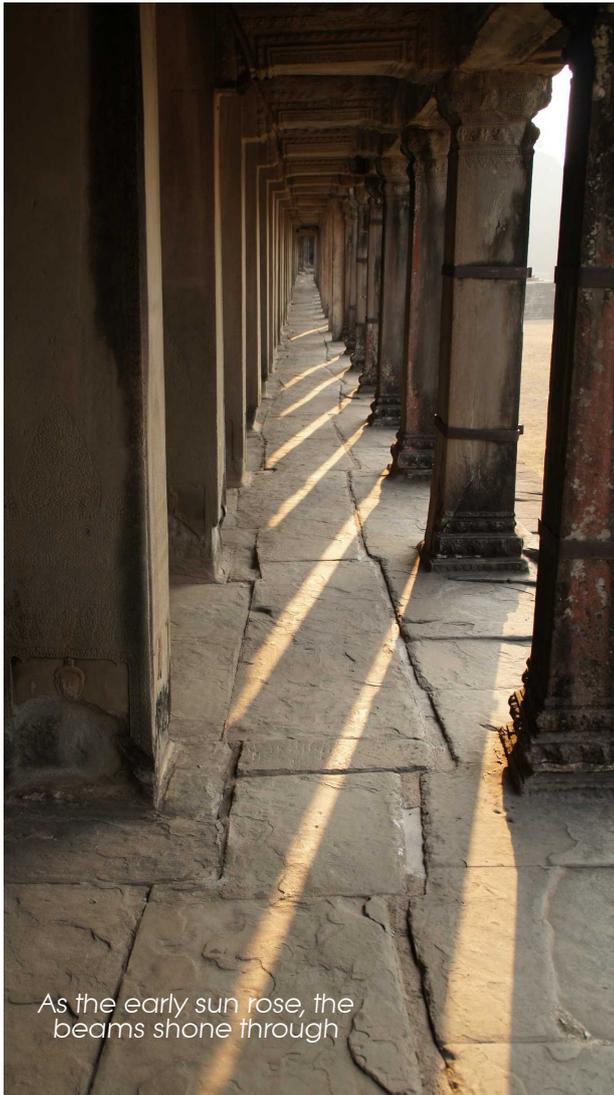
of Siem Reap (meaning Thais defeated). Though formerly mostly a fishing town, with the small-ish (during dry season) and incredibly vast (during wet season) lake of Tonle Sap providing heaps of fish, the town now primarily make its dollars from tou-

ris. It's the gateway to the Angkor complex of temples and ruins, the most famous of which would be Angkor Wat.

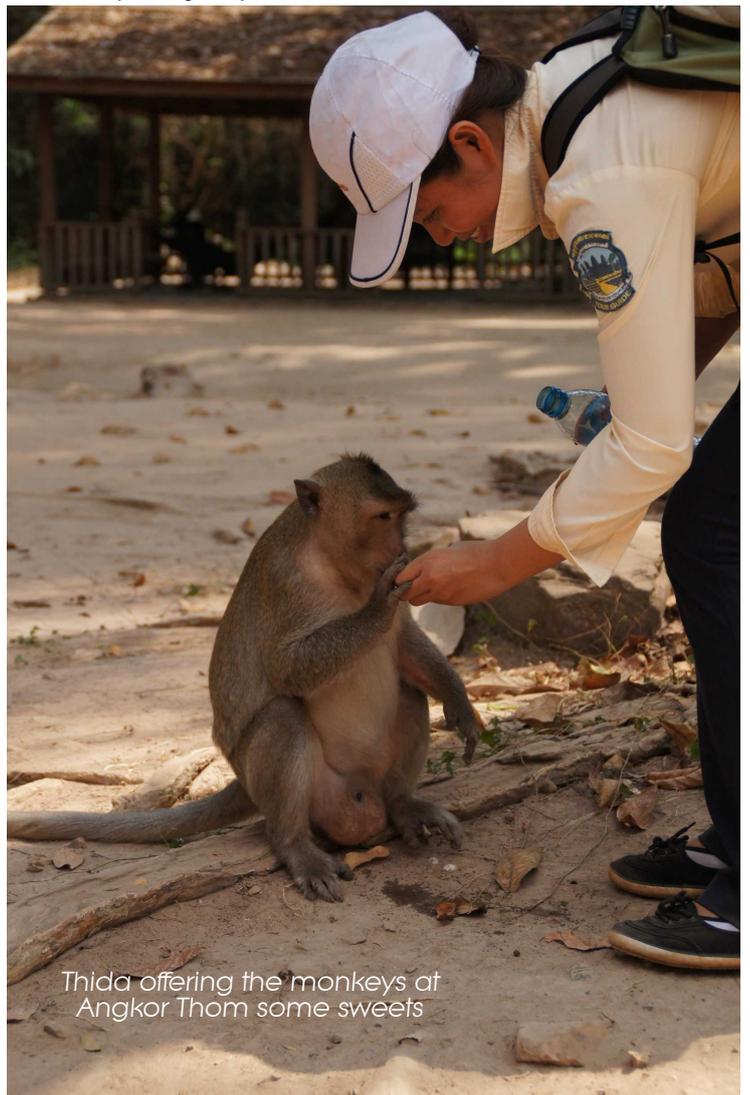
As starts go, this would be one of the earlier. 4:15 the bell tolled, with wheels rolling at 5:00 in order to get to Angkor Wat in time for the admittedly majestic sunrise. This day it was also indeed a test for my new camera and its supposedly sucky battery capacity. I did take half a gazillion photos, and by the afternoon I eventually had to switch batteries. Mind you, by that time we had ooh:ed and aah:ed at the 11:th century craftsmanship and engineering of Angkor Wat, Angkor Thom, Bayon, Taproh^m*, aka the Jungle Temple and Banteay Srei, aka the Ladies Temple due to its pinkish tint.

Our cicerone this long and hot day was the ever-smiling Thida, and she told us about all the bas-reliefs and their stories concerning gods and demons, about hindu, animist and buddhist traditions** in the various temples and about khmer history.

Frequently depicted on the bas-reliefs and other sto-



As the early sun rose, the beams shone through



Thida offering the monkeys at Angkor Thom some sweets

*) Where parts of the first Lara Croft movie was shot, as all tour guide and - books repeatedly informed of in no uncertain terms

**) Or old charters, or something...

The facts were these:

ANGKOR WAT is the largest Hindu temple complex in the world, situated at Angkor, Cambodia, built by King Suryavarman II in the early 12th century as his state temple and capital city. As the best-preserved temple at the site, it is the only one to have remained a significant religious centre since its foundation – first Hindu, then Buddhist. The temple is at the top of the high classical style of Khmer architecture. It has become a symbol of Cambodia, appearing on its national flag, and it is the country's prime attraction for visitors.

Angkor Wat combines two basic plans of Khmer temple architecture: the temple mountain and the later galleried temple. It is designed to represent Mount Meru, home of the devas in Hindu mythology: within a moat and an outer wall 3.6 kilometres long are three rectangular galleries, each raised above the next. At the centre of the temple stands a quincunx of towers. Unlike most Angkorian temples, Angkor Wat is oriented to the west; scholars are divided as to the significance of this. The temple is admired for the grandeur and harmony of the architecture, its extensive bas-reliefs, and for the numerous devatas adorning its walls.

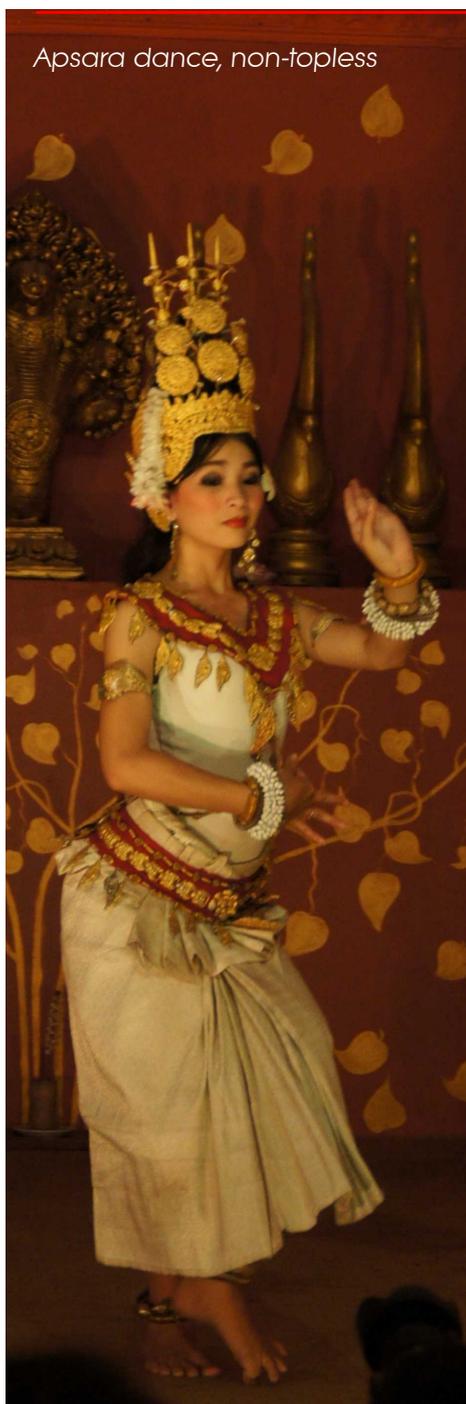
The modern name, Angkor Wat, means "City Temple"; Angkor is a vernacular form of the word nokor, which comes from the Sanskrit word nagar. Wat is the Khmer form of the Pali word "vatthu", meaning "temple grounds". Prior to this time the temple was known as Preah Pisnulok (Vara Vishnuloka in Sanskrit), after the posthumous title of its founder.





ne-carvings, were the apsaras. Those were, according to legend (that has since been woven into history) incredibly beautiful women, graceful and smooth, that could easily seduce gods and demons alike. In the old carvings they were always portrayed topless and dancing, with intricate headgear and beautifully woven silk dresses. The tradition of temple dancers has remained into these days, and in Siem Reap it's

easy to find apsara shows (albeit not topless at all) to be awed by while having a good piece of Khmer cuisine. It's impossible not to be impressed by the almost painfully slow, exquisite grace that these well-balanced dancers display. Plus, the fact that it's pretty much in the job description of an apsara dancer to be breathtakingly beautiful, the show is exceptionally easy on the eye.



Apsara dance, non-topless

Four artisans and a wedding

Ah. Khmer cuisine! But this time, it was I who did the cooking. The intense day in Siem Reap and surroundings started with Val, Kim and I heading off to cooking class. Chopping and stirring, wokking and frying, and I had cooked myself deep fried spring rolls and chicken amok (amok is a traditional Khmer dish and is a sort of stew with coconut milk, veggies, spinach, currypaste and egg, plus your choice of meat, fish or chicken). It turned out fairly decent, but with a full schedule ahead it was time to get moving.

Siem Reap is home to Artisan school, in which talented people can train their skills in stone carving, silk weaving, lacquer painting and so forth, while getting an education. Some of these schools were visited before taking the longboat to the floating village in Tonle Sap.



Bath-boy and Snake-Boy in Tonle Sap



Unlike other floating villages (the reed island villages in Titicaca springs to mind), there are no man-made islands to speak of. The people simply build their houses on rafts made of bamboo and go with the flow. And the flow goes vertically; the water level of Tonle Sap varies from roughly 1-2 metres in the dry season, and reaching ten metres higher than that after the rains. There are floating schools, floating churches, floating stores, floating basketball courts and floating whatnots, and besides fishing, the locals live off crocodile farming and tourism.

A rather laidback town, Siem Reap naturally offers relaxed bars, such as The Hammock Bar, with a stunning sunset view of the rice and lotus fields. A local beer in the hammock was accompanied by a selection of snake,



Wolf Nipple Chips, Dromedary Pretzels, Jaguar Ear Lobes, Tuscan Fried Bat and Otter Noses

frogs and snake eggs, all of which were quite edible, although not much meat on them.

The relaxing sunset beer was the perfect setup for the night's main event: A fellow Intrepid tour leader, as well as a friend of Alann's, was getting married, and so we all went to attend a genuine Cambodian wedding. Eight course dinner, on-stage enter-



Snake eggs

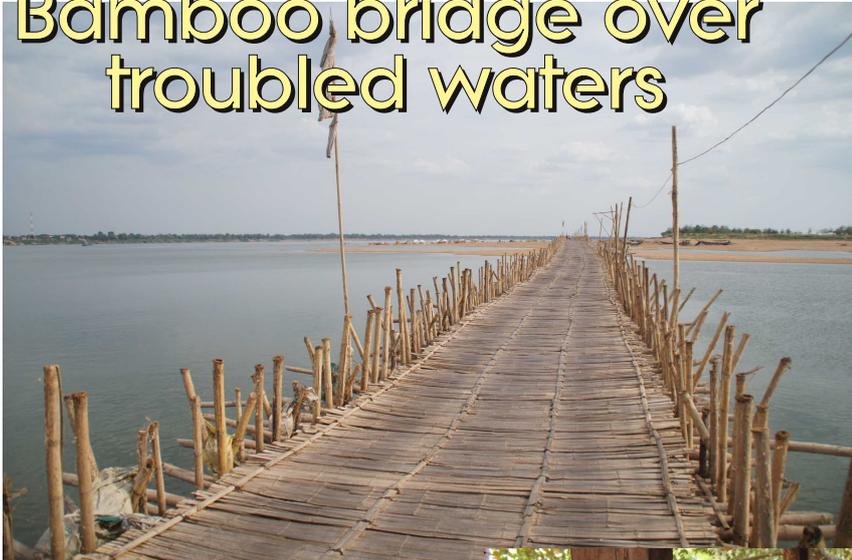
tainment and all the beer you could get your paws on was on the menu, and my handy combined ring/bottle opener went warm.

As the wedding ended after having been going on for two days, we trotted off to the local karaoke parlour. Unlike western karaoke bars, in South East Asia you get your own room for your company, thus only making a fool of yourself in front of people you already know, not in front of complete strangers. Thida and Alann sang popular Cambodians songs, I sang the Beatles and suchlike, and some of the rest, well, sang as well. And thusly ended a most eventful day, with an early rise the following morning.



11 travellers and a wedding:
 Chez, Phil, Sandra, Michael, Kimberley, Mr. & Mrs. Kim, Chris, Isabelle, Matt, Martin, Valerie, Trevor

Bamboo bridge over troubled waters



It was high time to test the Cambodian public transport system. It worked, just. A little shaky, a little late, and a lot of in Khmer badly dubbed Thai films of dubious quality, not to mention the on and off karaoke in the bus. But without mishaps we reached the sleepy riverside town of Kampong Cham by the banks of the mighty Mekong river. Although the bus ride had taken most of the day, there was still time to get activated. A cheap penny provided us with a set of fairly decent rented bicycles, and

off we pedalled. The destination was the river-engulfed island of Koh Pen, and to get there, we had to bike across the bridge. Concrete? Nah. Steel? Nope. Stone? Alas. Bamboo? Betcha!

The island was lush and beautiful and very quaint. The people living there, mostly farmers, were welcoming and friendly. The kids knew at least two expressions in English: 'Hello!' and 'High five!', which they eagerly shouted as we clinkingly glided past their picturesque and stilted homes.

After a walk through the various patches of farming (mostly corn and tobacco) and a visit to the local buddhist temple, we encountered the local school. The children were enthusiastically trying to improve their English, and we did the best we could helping them out, through exercises, songs and regular conversations.



Teaching Cambodian schoolchildren some English

And the local interaction wouldn't stop there. We were invited to the home of a friend of Alann's, where his wife had cooked us a delicious dinner of traditional khmer food. The dessert was more of a european style, though, as it happened to be co-traveller Phil's birthday.

Nightmarkets and weird rooftop bars were also on the menu on this my first, but certainly not last, day of encountering the mighty Mekong.



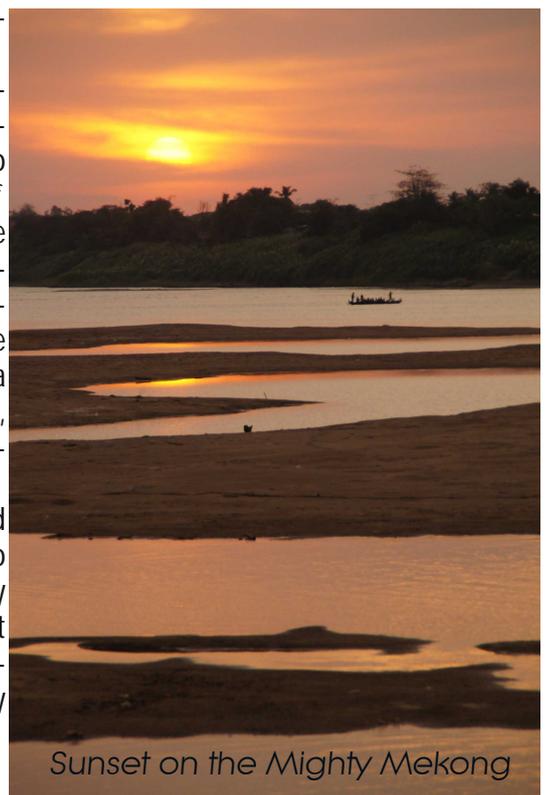
Corn

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Sunset on the Mighty Mekong



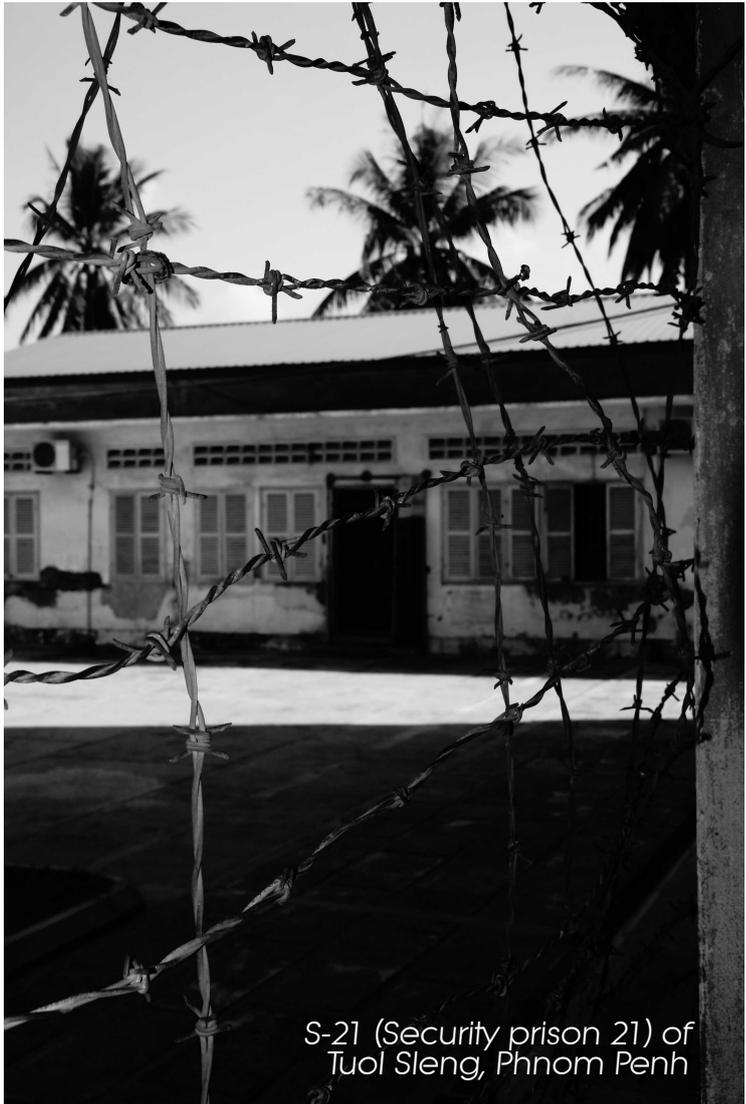
Some of the many victims of the Khmer Rouge

Cambodia has a dark past and a sorrowful recent history. Nowhere are we more urgently reminded of that than in its capitol Phnom Penh.

As the Khmer Rouge rose to power in 1975, led by Pol Pot, Nuon Chea, Ieng Sary, Son Sen, and Khieu Samphan one of the most massive genocides in history started. The name of the country was at that dark period Democratic Kampuchea, and under the Khmer Rouge regime the population decreased from 7 million to roughly 4 million, with at least 1,7 million people being murdered and the rest fleeing to mostly Vietnam and Thailand.

As an agrarian, penny- and propertyless society was, according to the Khmer Rouge, the ideal solution, there was not much need of cities. That is why the citizens of Phnom Penh, roughly a million of them, were forcibly removed from the city overnight. There have been many ghost towns for various reasons, but never before in recent history has there been a ghost city. With the capitol firmly in control of the extreme communist regime, it was used as a base for governmental operations, including the prison system.

One of the more infamous prisons/interrogation/torture facilities is S-21 (Security prison 21) of Tuol Sleng. A former high school, this was where they took everyone that was considered a threat to the agrarian communism the Khmer Rouge had in mind: Doctors, engineers, me-



S-21 (Security prison 21) of Tuol Sleng, Phnom Penh

chanics, intellectuals. In unspeakable conditions, these people were held captive, interrogated, tortured and abused, simply for the crime of not being uneducated farmers. With accusations of being Vietnamese spies, or working with the CIA or KGB, they were daily tormented by various means of torture, they were starved and locked into tiny cells, and weren't allowed to talk to the other victims. The ruthless guards were mostly teenagers, having been brainwashed to do what they believed to be right. Whether a confession or not arose from the frequent torturous interrogations, the victims were eventually transported to Choeung Ek. Being told they were being transported to their new home as farmers on the countryside, they were in fact ushered blindfolded and shackled into covered vans, taking them the one hour ride to Choeung Ek, most commonly known as The Killing Fields. The victims were often beaten to death with metal pipes or chains.

Sometimes machetes were used, but as the enemy closed in, and the numbers of prisoners increased, the perpetrators started to use bullets instead, all for a quicker way of execution.

Not all victims were adult males. Far from it. Infants, children and women received the same, if not worse treatment. Children being taken away from their mothers, sometimes killed in front of them, added to the atrocities.

And all this took place, not in a muddy stretch of dead wasteland far off, but in lush and beautiful surroundings, with local people just nearby. And they never knew what was going on; to drown out the screams, music was played incredibly loud. To conceal the smell of the rotten corpses, chemicals were sprinkled over the bodies.

The horrors finally ended in 1979, when the Vietnamese liberated Phnom Penh and released the Cambodian people from the clutches of the Khmer Rouge. To a certain degree.

"Every Cambodian who lived through it has permanent injuries to the body or the mind or both."

-anon.

Contents of the Memorial Stupa: 8,000 skulls sorted by age and gender.

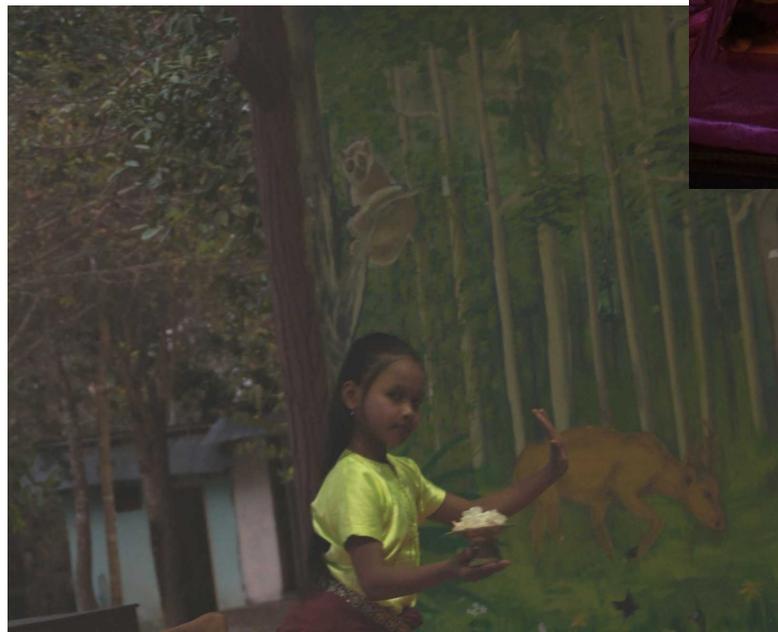
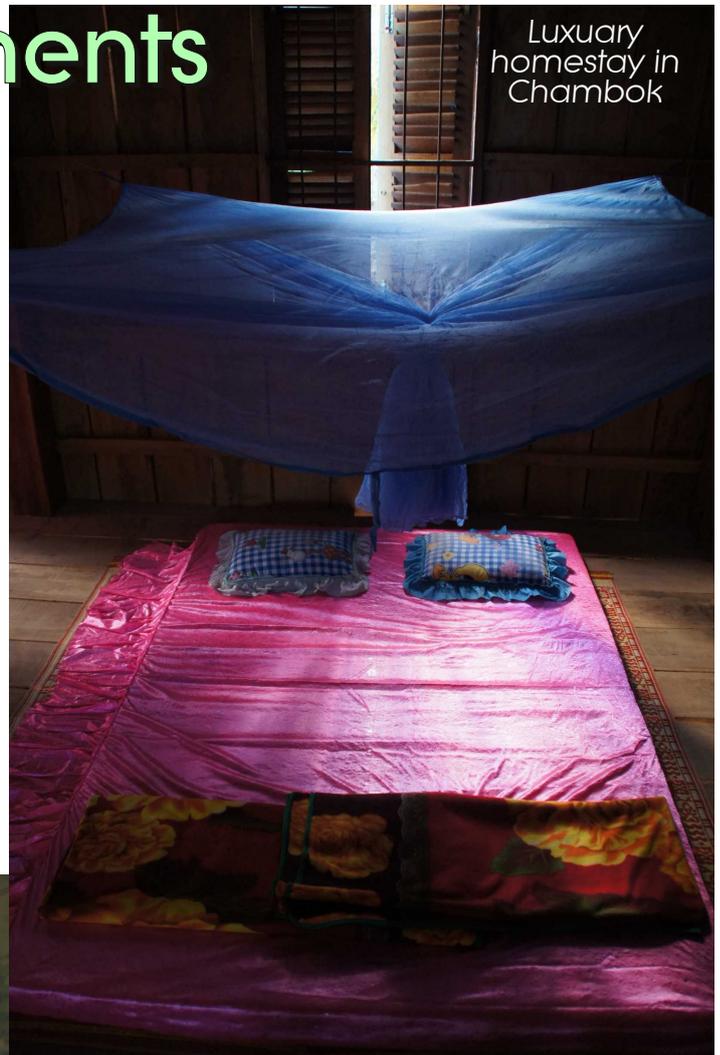


The three elements

The bustling city of Phnom Penh was left in favour of going to the silent* countryside. The agrarian community of Chambok welcomed us with open arms and a volleyball court with the net high up in the skies, even by European standards. The group was divided and invited to two local homes. Mrs Kim proudly showed us her chateau, which were to be our accomodation for the night. Big, silk clad mattresses, covered in bright blue or pink mosquito nets were spaciouly spread around the house, and since Phil have had to stay in the city with Chris due to an unwelcome burst of adult chicken pox, none needed to share beds.

The community centre offered a dinner and a show, in the form of the local women cooking a traditional khmer meal and the children performing a dance and song number (including, but not limited to, a welcome dance, an apsara dance, and the always amusing coconut dance).

Next morning, we watched as the farmers went to work at sunrise, we were shown the fields, and we



Apsara dance, the junior version

saw (and smelled) how they collect bovine feces and process it to make methane gas and fertilizer. The methane method is fairly new to the area, but ever since its introduction, it has significantly reduced the amount of trees being chopped down for firewood. This community, and these people, live through the earth.

*) Except for the plentiful and loudbeaked roosters, early in the morning





Fire by the water at the Full Moon Party in Sihanoukville, with Martin & Chez, Michael and Matt



A quick walk in the beautiful surroundings ended with a swim by the waterfall, before heading south, to the Koh Phangan of Cambodia: the coastal town of Sihanoukville. With the hotel bang by the beach and the afternoon off, we went for drinks, sunbathing, volleyball and most importantly the water toy park they had a bit out in the water: inflatable water slide, inflatable climbing rock and an undulating trampoline provided shits and giggles for the less tanning prone of us. Before this trip I had 20 logged dives. My goal is to double that figure

before going back, and therefore I found myself, once again, on a boat with a lot of air tanks.

To be honest, after diving at the Similans, the dive sites in Cambodia were a bit of a downer. Low visibility and rather few colours. But life was aplenty and I saw some cool bluespotted stingrays, so the two dives off Sihanoukville was decent enough. I said my goodbyes to the Dutch, Danish, Cambodian and French people at the on-island dive centre and took the longboat back. This centre, and these people, live through the

water.

At dinner, consisting of the best barbecued seafood ever** (barbacuda, shrimps (or prawns), squid and suchlike), we played werewolf, which is a game in which the players are randomly given certain roles, such as werewolf, witch, seer or regular villager. Each night the werewolf kills somebody, and at daytime everybody tries, through discussion and logic, to find out who the werewolf is. Sometimes the villagers succeed in killing the werewolf, sometimes the werewolf eats the entire village. It's good fun, and especially appropriate as

the full moon was coming next night. Everyone who is anyone have been to an FMP. Most people who have, have also hooked up, painted themselves and others with fluorescent paint, drunk heaps of cheap booze and/or danced the night away. The best places would certainly be Koh Phangan or any

other Thai island in the Gulf of Thailand, but if timing isn't right, Cambodian coast towns work as well. After dinner, consisting of the best barbecued seafood ever** (barracuda, shrimps (or prawns), squid and suchlike), we set off to the close-by Full Moon Party, and experienced most of what's mentioned above.

All the while, fireworks lit up the sky, and talented artists performed an awe-inspiring fire show, including juggling two-end lit torches. This beach, and these people, live through the fire.

Air? Yes, I had that in my tank whilst diving.



Diving in Cambodia

The facts were these:

SIHANOUKVILLE (Khmer: Krong Preah Sihanouk), also known as Kampong Saom, is a province (khaet) of Cambodia on the Gulf of Thailand. This port city is a growing Cambodian urban center, located 185 kilometres southwest of the Cambodian capital, Phnom Penh. The province is named after King Father Norodom Sihanouk and grew up around the construction of Sihanoukville Port. Construction on the port began in June 1955 and it was the only deep water port in Cambodia. The port was built in part due to the waning power of the French leading to the Vietnamese tightening their control over the Mekong Delta and hence restricting river access to Cambodia. Sihanoukville's beaches have made it a popular tourist destination.

Sihanoukville attracts tourists with its relaxed beach atmosphere when compared to Thailand's more developed ones. However, the city has attracted not only tourists, but several NGOs and foreign and national investors in the last years in order to develop not only the growing tourist industry, but its capacity as an international sea port and other sectors like textile and real estate. In Sihanoukville is also located the main factory of Angkor Beer, the Cambodian national beer.

Sihanoukville was the place of the last official battle of the United States army in the Vietnam War, although the incident took place outside Vietnam. It is known as the Mayagüez incident on May 12–15, 1975 between the US forces and the Khmer Rouge. Currently, visitors dive in Koh Tang, one of the Sihanoukville islands where the major battle to free the SS Mayagüez took place. Divers can see two shipwrecks 40 metres down.

On 22 December 2008, King Norodom Sihamoni signed a Royal Decree that changed the municipalities of Kep, Pailin and Sihanoukville into provinces, as well as adjusting several provincial borders.

**) Definitely top 30

Phnom Penh 2: The Happy

After some excellent days on the countryside and by (and in) the sea, we returned to Phnom Penh to experience its lesser sad parts. The cyclo tours were cheap and could be arranged to avoid the more touristy places. Although we did request to go to the dodgier parts of town, no ghettos were visited, no drive-bys or street corner cockfights were witnessed.

For those with haggling powers and the feel for quality where it's not expected, the Russian market can be a gold-mine. Counterfeit (and on rare occasions, the real deal) brand name products can be

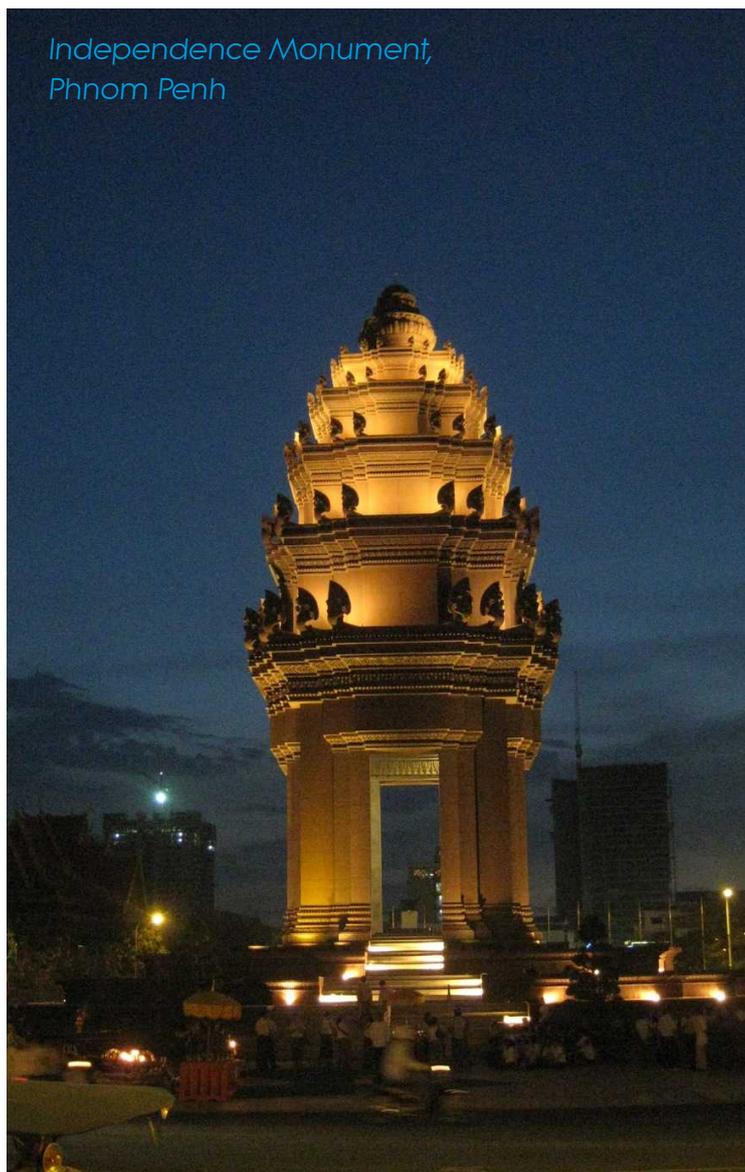
acquired for a small penny, and they do have all sorts of trinkets and whatnots. A pair of "Converse" found their way in my shopping bag, whereas others focused on expanding their already vast collection of Abercrombie & Fitch items. Although housing roughly 1.5 million inhabitants, Phnom Penh is apparently a rather small town, as we randomly ran in to some other members of our Intrepid group, and could therefore overload (six of us) a tuk-tuk back to the hotel.

At nighttime, the Cambodian capitol awakens. And they all seem

to gather at the park by the royal palace, in order to do their typical Cambodian aerobics. Gathered together in groups, the half exercise, half dancing goes on for roughly three hours, and anyone can join in and exit as they please.

Perusing the Sisowath Quay area, the sightings included the Royal Palace, the Silver Pagoda and the Independence Monument.

After dinner we went for a drink in what most probably was the red light district, and I tried one of Chez' many odd combinations: Menthol fag and White Russian. It works, mate, it works!



Independence Monument,
Phnom Penh

The facts were these:

PHNOM PENH is the capital and largest city of Cambodia. Located on the banks of the Mekong River, Phnom Penh has been the national capital since the French colonized Cambodia, and has grown to become the nation's center of economic and industrial activities, as well as the center of security, politics, economics, cultural heritage, and diplomacy of Cambodia.

Once known as the "Pearl of Asia", it was considered one of the loveliest French-built cities in Indochina in the 1920s. Phnom Penh, along with Siem Reap and Sihanoukville, are significant global and domestic tourist destinations for Cambodia. Founded in 1434, the city is noted for its beautiful and historical architecture and attractions. There are a number of surviving French colonial buildings scattered along the grand boulevards.

Situated on the banks of the Tonlé Sap, Mekong and Bassac rivers, the Phnom Penh metropolitan area is home to more than 2 million of Cambodia's population of over 14 million. The city is the wealthiest and most populous city in Cambodia and is home to the country's political hub.

Who she mean?

The facts were these:

HO CHI MINH CITY, formerly named Saigon (Sài Gòn) is the largest city in Vietnam. It was once known as Prey Nokor, an important Khmer sea port prior to annexation by the Vietnamese in the 17th century.

Under the name Saigon, it was the capital of the French colony of Cochinchina and later of the independent republic of South Vietnam from 1955–75. South Vietnam, as an anti-communist republic, fought against the communist North Vietnamese and Viet Cong during the Vietnam War, with aid from the United States of America and countries including Australia, New Zealand and South Korea. Saigon fell when it was captured by the communists on 30 April 1975, bringing an end to the War with its enemy's victory. Vietnam was then turned into a communist state with the South overtaken. On 2 July 1976, Saigon merged with the surrounding Gia Dinh Province and was officially renamed Hồ Chí Minh City after Hồ Chí Minh (although the name Sài Gòn is still commonly used.)

The city center is situated on the banks of the Saigon River, 60 kilometers from the South China Sea and 1,760 kilometers south of Hanoi, the capital of Vietnam.

The metropolitan area, which consists of the Ho Chi Minh City metropolitan area, Thu Dau Mot, Di An, Biên Hòa and surrounding towns, is populated by more than 9,000,000 people, making it the most populous metropolitan area in Vietnam and the countries of the former French Indochina. The Greater Ho Chi Minh City Metropolitan Area, a metropolitan area covering most parts of Đông Nam Bộ plus Tiền Giang and Long An provinces under planning will have an area of 30,000 square kilometers with a population of 20 million inhabitants by 2020.



Vietnamese traffic, with Saigon Skydeck in the background

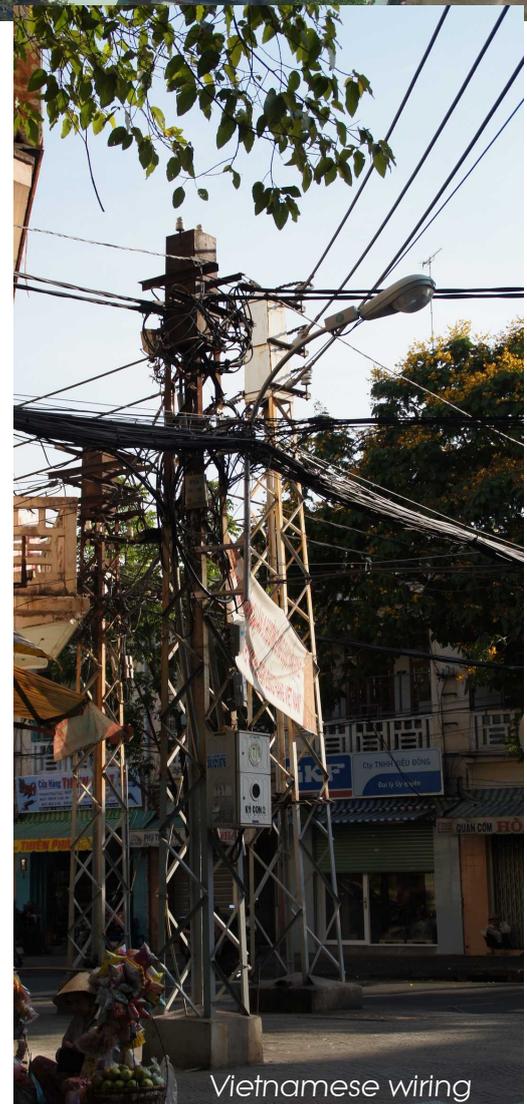
Cambodia, farewell!

The border crossing went without any hassle, and soon I traded on visited country #37*. With the letters all of a sudden being more or less latin and the addition of people wearing pointy straw hats, it was easy to establish that we were now in another country, namely Vietnam.

Its largest city Ho Chi Minh City, or rather the locally and more traditional Saigon, is a bustling city of nine million people, all driving scooters. The urban planning is not as disastrous as in other south east asian cities, but the population explosion and subsequent crowdedness has left the once majestic colonial boulevards and the french architecture in a state of decay.

The vastness of the city, as well as the meandering of the Saigon River, can be seen from Saigon Skydeck on Bitexco financial tower. With excellent binoculars and strategically placed touchscreen information screens, the observation platform is one of the best I've experienced.

*) Does that include Sweden? Yes.



Vietnamese wiring



War remnants museum

The view is better from the rooftop terrace of the nearby Sheraton, though. Even though a slogan sometimes used is 'Vietnam - a country, not a war', there's no denying that the many wars that have wreaked havoc here over the past 100 years is clearly imprinted in the collective minds of the Vietnamese people. Therefore, a visit to the War remnants museum is more or less a must. The horrifying stories and the even more horrifying photographs tell a cruel story, but one that needs to be

But to get closer to the actual city, one has to walk, or rather, take a cyclo tour. After an icecream by the river, we climbed aboard the vehicle so typical for Vietnam. The seldom-trodded (by tourists) sidewalks swooshed** past as we took in the local atmosphere (and traffic pollution) on our way to the local good-luck hindu/buddha temple. My meditative state was interrupted though, by an old lady amusedly inquiring (by means of pointing and various facial expres-

sions) about my little beagle-shaped mascot. The days in HCMC were days of endings and of beginnings. The first leg out of three was over, and before Chris, Sandra, Michael, Matthew, Chez, Phil and Alann signed off for other adventures (some, admittedly, involving flying back home to cold Europe) we had a farewell dinner, followed by drinks at the rooftop terrace of the Rex, with a decent view of the busy city.



Chez checking out Ho Chi Minh City

told. Silently contemplating the dark past and missing the lost co-travellers, one must not forget that Ho Chi Minh City also offered a new beginning, in the shape of the new gang that were to join Kim, Trev, Val, Isa and me throughout Vietnam: Granma-mum-daughter-trio Joan, Donna and Jackie from Oz, Scottish couple Mhari and Kevin, senior Norwegian Björg and German Annika, all led by local tourleader Tuyen.

***) Swooshed is perhaps a big word for the roughly 9,5 kph we were hauled around at



Stew cooked in bamboo

The facts were these:

The MEKONG DELTA (Vietnamese: đồng bằng sông Cửu Long "Nine Dragon river delta") is the region in southwestern Vietnam where the Mekong River approaches and empties into the sea through a network of distributaries. The Mekong delta region encompasses a large portion of southwestern Vietnam of 39,000 sqm. The size of the area covered by water depends on the season.

The Mekong Delta has recently been dubbed as a 'biological treasure trove'. Over 10,000 new species have been discovered in previously unexplored areas of Mekong Delta, including a species of rat, the Laotian rock rat or kha-nyou, thought to be extinct.

Mekong delta

We meet again. The Mekong is undoubtedly the most important river of South east Asia, and even moreso where it flows out into the South Chinese sea. Its delta consists of hundreds of islands, with the sediment providing nutrient soil, making the entire area beautifully fertile. Here fishing and farming abounds.

Coconut is the main harvest, and they use pretty much everything from the palm: The stem provides building materials and firewood, the leaves makes for excellent roofing and weaving of baskets, and the nuts and fruit are as useful as can be: Cups, bowls, teapotpots can be made from the shells, the water and the actual fruit is used for making milk, sugar, oil and of

course coconut flakes.

Even though fishing and fishfarming is lucrative business, the main source of income in the village in which we were welcomed for our homestay is coconut.

A longboat noisily transported us along the mighty river, past Unicorn Island and Turtle Island onto Coconut Island, on which we indulged in coconut candy, shot snake wine and cuddled pythons before boarding the slim rowboats that glided silently through the patchwork of mangrove-lined canals.

Our home for the night was more of a guesthouse than an actual homestay, but it was nevertheless nice to swap the citysounds for the more agrarian persuasion. We took

a bikeride through the impossibly hard-navigated labyrinth (maze?) of narrow concrete paths before helping out the locals in the shredding, rolling and deep-frying of springrolls that were part of the sustainable dinner we later enjoyed.

After dinner a big bottle of what looked like water was produced and its content poured into shot glasses. And when your local host offers, you happily accept. Even though it was fairly untastey, the home-made ricebooze went down smoothly, after a few shots.

The roosters called, and after a delicious brekkie consisting of omelettes that weren't sugared at all, we headed back to Saigon for the overnight train to the coast.

Isa surfing the canals of the Mekong delta

Nha Trang



An overnight train took us from Ho Chi Minh City to the scenic coastal town of Nha Trang. Beers was had on the train, and music streamed from my iPhone in one crowded compartment. Eventually everybody crawled into their bunks, as arrival time in Nha Trang would be roughly 5:15.

As the sun rose and the waves broke, we took a stroll along the yet uncrowded sandy beach before brekkie.

As the late night slowly transformed to morning, it was time for a

boat trip to some nearby islands for snorkelling, swimming, sunbathing and a visit to a local fishing village. The fairly large bamboo baskets they use for fish also doubles as dingys, and we were silently paddled in them across the water to our boat.

As for the snorkelling, it was perfectly fine wildlifewise, but as the visibility, even close to the surface, was fairly low, I decided to give any Scuba diving in Nha Trang a miss and instead opted to use the next day to catch the coastal town.

The town is definitely less hectic than HCMC, yet one can easily find oneself lost among the streets, who are often annoyingly devoid of sidestreets. And since the taxis, tuk-tuks and cyclos tend to gather in the touristier areas along the beach, if you get lost in the more locally flavoured parts of the town, you'd better make sure you have your trekking shoes on and your internal GPS in tune.

Although beer is easily available throughout southeast Asia, the selection is poor at best; you can choose from three or four different brands of weak, if indeed refreshing, light lager. A welcome change from that was at Louisiane Brewhouse, a rather fancy pool- and beachside restaurant, in which they also had a microbrewery. As we had a very nice seafood dinner overlooking the beach and the sea, I had the pleasure of tasting their very fine lager, their weissbier, their ale and their dark lager, and all was good.

The relaxing days in touristy (for western, asian and Vietnamese tourists



Baskets and/or boats at fishing village off the coast of Nha Trang

alike) Nha Trang ended with a barbecue dinner, in which we all sat down and were given miniature barbies and grilled our own very vast spread of meat, chicken, veggies and seafood.

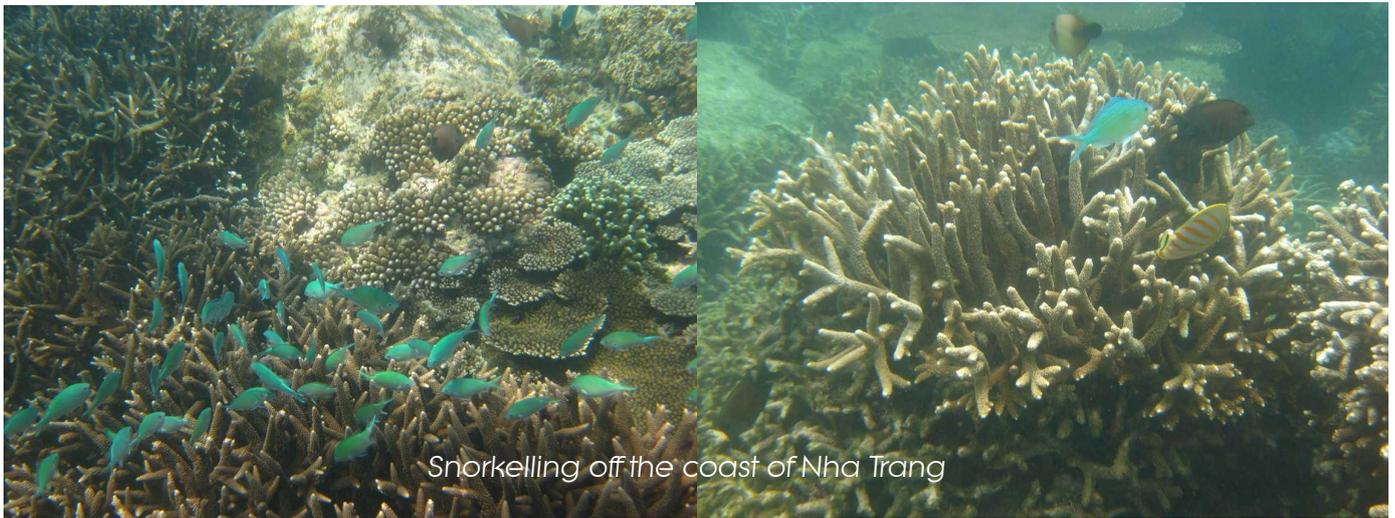
As we were heading even further north along the coastline of South Chinese Sea, we boarded another overnight train, and this time we had an eskie. Kim specials were frequently mixed (orange juice, strawberry/raspberry juice, ice and huge amounts of vodka) and the train puffed along, heading for Da Nang.

The facts were these:

NHA TRANG is a coastal city and capital of Khanh Hoa province, on the South Central Coast of Vietnam. It is bounded on the North by Ninh Hoà district, on the East by the South China Sea, on the South by Cam Ranh town and on the West by Diên Khánh district. The city has about 300,000 inhabitants.

Nha Trang is well known for its pristine beaches and is fast becoming a popular destination for international tourists, attracting large numbers of backpackers as well as more affluent travellers on the Southeast Asia circuit. It is already very popular with Vietnamese tourists. Nha Trang Bay is widely considered as amongst the world's most beautiful bays. Tourists are welcome to participate in the Sea Festival, held biennially and was also approved to host 2016 Asian Beach Games.

Historically, the city was known as Kauthara under the Champa. The city is still home to the famous Po Nagar Tower built by the Champa. Being a coastal city, Nha Trang is a centre for marine science based at the Nha Trang Oceanography Institute. The Hon Mun marine protected area is one of four first marine protected areas in the world admitted by the IUCN.



Snorkelling off the coast of Nha Trang

Anagram#1

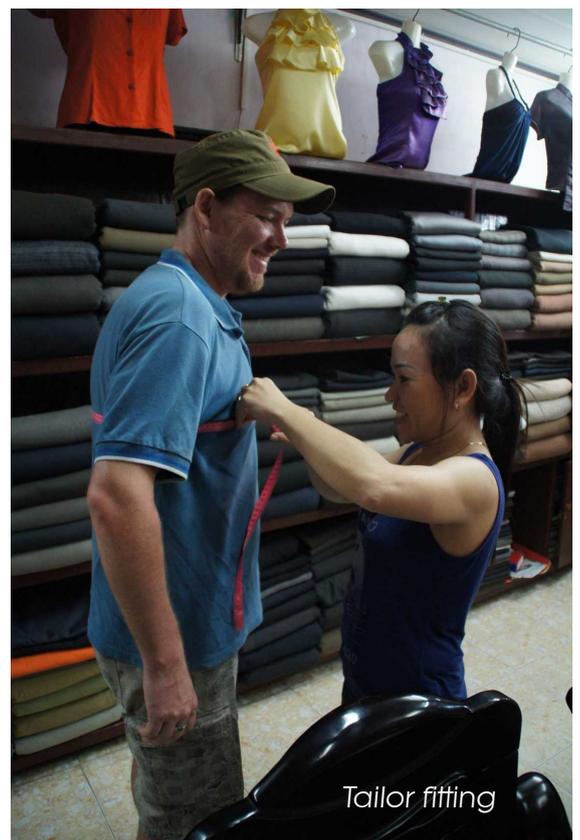
The capitol of Vietnam is Hanoi. Hoi An, however, is the capitol of tailors.

We arrived at noonish and went for a walk around the ancient city. After snapping the obligatory photos and seeing the compulsory sights I set out for the day's mission: To find myself a high quality, reasonably priced tailor and have some suits made. I browsed among the hundreds of available choices and found one suitable* candidate: Vu Thun, quite close to my hotel. After taking measures and picked fabrics, I left, having ordered a classic three-piece in dark grey, an off-white linen number, an overcoat and two shirts. US\$225 for the whole enchilada.

Hoi An is a small, old and very relaxed town. Tailors and restaurants are everywhere to be found, and Annika, Isa and I tested a very cosy one, where we dug in on ten different dishes, all of which tasted between good and excellent. Except for the soup, that is. There's something in the Vietnamese broth that I just can't take.

As the town is small, the topography is flat and the countryside is just around the corner, Hoi An is a great place for

*) Pun intended



Tailor fitting

Shrimp farming, low season



The facts were these:

Hoi An is a city of Vietnam, on the coast of the South China Sea in the South Central Coast of Vietnam. It is located in Quang Nam province and is home to approximately 120,000 inhabitants. It is recognized as a World Heritage Site by UNESCO. Hoi An Ancient Town is an exceptionally well-preserved example of a South-East Asian trading port dating from the 15th to the 19th century. Its buildings and its street plan reflect the influences, both indigenous and foreign, that have combined to produce this unique heritage site.

The city possessed the largest harbour in Southeast Asia in the 1st century and was known as Lâm Ấp Phô (Champa City). Between the seventh and 10th centuries, the Cham (people of Champa) controlled the strategic spice trade and with this came tremendous wealth. The former harbour town of the Cham at the estuary of the Thu Bôn River was an important Vietnamese trading centre in the 16th and 17th centuries, where Chinese from various provinces as well as Japanese, Dutch and Indians settled. During this period of the China trade, the town was called Hai Pho (Seaside Town) in Vietnamese. Originally, Hai Pho was a divided town with the Japanese settlement across the "Japanese Bridge" (16th-17th century). The bridge (Chùa cầu) is a unique covered structure built by the Japanese, the only known covered bridge with a Buddhist pagoda attached to one side.

renting bikes. We took in the scenery from the saddle, and when we got back it was about time to get into our greenest gear; March had passed its peak and turned 17, so St Patrick's Day was celebrated. Unfortunately Hoi An, for reasons unknown, does not, I repeat, not, have an Irish pub around the corner. No Guinness were to be found, but at least we had a good barbecue and several local LaRue beer. And Before&Now had happy hour till late and played Radio-

head, Muse and Ocean Colour Scene, to name a few.

Hoi An also has a river, which leads to the sea, and thus we spent a good deal of time at the beach and in the refreshing water.

Before leaving this charming settlement, I returned to my tailor, coughed up the agreed upon amount and stuffed my bag with tightly packed suits and coats, since shipping them home would cost about half of the item's cost extra.

As the night fell and hunger set in, we steered our rented bikes to a very picturesque riverside slow food eatery. Grilled fish in banana leaves, an amazing view of the sparsely lit river and a pastis completed the evening.

Sunset on the Thu Bôn



Slow food



Hué we are



Royal Banquet:
Back: Mhari, Kevin, Isa,
Martin, Joan, Annika

Front: Bjorg, Kim, King
Trev, Queen Val,
Donna and Jackie

Vietnamese
vocalist



Not far from Hoi An is Hué*, a spiritual town in middle Vietnam, with strong mandarin connections and once the imperial capitol.

After a quick detour to Da Nang and its lavish marble statue workshop, we embarked on a short, five hour journey to Hué. On the way there, however, is one of Vietnam's most strategically important places: Hai Van pass, overlooking Lang Co lagoon in the Gulf of Tonkin. Those in control of Hai Van pass control the transport routes from North Vietnam to south (and vice, you know, versa), both inland and by sea. You can see far and wide, which is why both the French and later the Americans conquered it and built their bunkers there.

As the only city in Vietnam, Hué still do royal banquets. The concept is as simple as it is touristy. Each company selects (or as we did, rather more close to reality, randomly assign) a king and a queen, all dress up in traditional mandarin clothing and sit down for a traditional multi-course dinner, each dish lavishly garnered with vegetables turned into statuet-

tes of, mostly, phoenixes (phoenii?). The king takes his high seat in front of the painting of the dragon (symbol of power, appropriate for a man, right?) and the queen in front of the phoenix (symbol of beauty, appropriate for a woman, right?) and all dine while listening to a traditional band performing traditional, and sometimes contemporary, music. As chance would have it, Trevor drew the king card, and his real-life wife Val became the queen. What are the odds?**)

After the banquet, the student-run

*) Pronounced 'who-eh', not 'Hugh' as some would believe

**) No really, what are the odds of a real life couple becoming king and queen? We had two couples in our group. With the king and queen being randomly selected independently, amongst three men and nine women, you do the maths.



Carefully carved carrots at the royal banquet in Hue

The Citadel



bar of Brown Eyes offered free shots and 2-for-1 drinks, which Kim, Isa and I enthusiastically downed. As we came back to the hotel we were greeted by a sad notice: Mhari's dad had taken a turn for the worse, so she and Kevin had to leave for home straight away. We said our goodbyes to the Scots and hoped that everything would work out fine.

Next morning, each of us got a scooter. Unfortunately, each of us also got a driver, meaning we wouldn't be driving ourselves, not even us with a motorcycle licence. The not so speedy, but oh so scenic, drive took us through crowded streets, highways, desolate roads, dirt roads and narrow forest paths. A whole deal of sights was visited, including, but not limited to, a farmer's market, imperial tombs, the death match arena where elephants used to fight tigers, an orphanarium, Thien Mu pagoda and lunch at a nunnery. The way back was taken via a dragon-boat along Perfume River.

After a long day and a long shower we headed out for dinner. A very nice restaurant with bridges and greenery and waterfalls inside served a delicious meal (including vinegar for the chips) and added a surprise on the bill: 2000 dong for the napkin. Yep, they tried to charge us for the napkin. Nope, not gonna happen. Not today, not any day. No sireebob.

Not far from the napkin place was

a beer garden, which boasted about 30 beers on their menu, including the black gold of brews. Unfortunately, they were out of Guinness, but a nice Urquell and a Hoegaarden found their way to my throat, and it was a nice change from all the local pilsners.

Next morning a must-do trip to the Citadel was on the agenda. As the former empire was heavily influenced by Chinese customs, the



Thanh Toan covered bridge

Thien Mu Pagoda



Imperial city in which the citadel is located follows the same pattern as the Forbidden City in Beijing. Lots of space, lavish buildings, pagodas, opera theatres and temples were some of the contents of this majestic maison, and elephants to boot.

There was no time to catch an opera though, as it was closing in on afternoon, and with it, the rapid boarding of our last Vietnamese overnight train. Dinner onboard would consist of baguette with salami and La Vache qui rit, paired with crisps and jellies, conveniently purchased at the supermarket before boarding. The food served in the restaurant cart is not recommended for westerners, and it felt a bit unnecessary to risk spending the better part of a shaky, 12 hour trainride on its not too crispy clean toilets. Before boarding the train, however, we said our goodbyes to Björg, who had decided to end the trip in Hué and thereafter heading back to Hoi An. The rest of us, what few that was left, set the bearing for north.

The facts were these:

Hué is the capital city of Thua Thien – Hue province, Vietnam. Between 1802 and 1945, it was the imperial capital of the Nguyen dynasty. Its population stands at about 950,000. Hué originally rose to prominence as the capital of the Nguyen Lords, a feudal dynasty which dominated much of southern Vietnam from the 17th to the 19th century. In 1775 when Trinh Sâm captured it, it was known as Phú Xuân. In 1802, Nguyen Phúc Ánh (later Emperor Gia Long) succeeded in establishing his control over the whole of Vietnam, thereby making Hué the national capital.

Minh Mang was the second emperor of the Nguyen Dynasty, reigning from 14 February 1820 (his 29th birthday) until his death, on 20 January 1841. He was well known for his opposition to French involvement in Vietnam, and for his rigid Confucian orthodoxy.

Hué was the national capital until 1945, when Emperor Bao Dai abdicated and a communist government was established in Hà Nội. While Bao Dai was briefly proclaimed "Head of State" with the help of the returning French colonialists in 1949 (although not with recognition from the communists and the full acceptance of the Vietnamese people), his new capital was Saigon.

In the Vietnam War, Hué's central position placed it very near the border between North Vietnam and South Vietnam; however, the city was located in South Vietnam. In the Tet Offensive of 1968, during the Battle of Hué, the city suffered considerable damage not only to its physical features, but its reputation as well, most of it from American firepower and bombings on the historical buildings as well as the massacre at Hué committed by the communist forces. After the war's conclusion, many of the historic features of Hué were neglected because they were seen by the victorious regime and some other Vietnamese as "relics from the feudal regime"; the Vietnamese Communist Party doctrine officially described the Nguyen Dynasty as "feudal" and "reactionary." There has since been a change of policy, however, and many historical areas of the city are currently being restored.



Plowing in palm leaf raincoat

Halong, halong must we sing this song



The weather was cool and overcast as we set off towards Halong bay, in the very northeast of Vietnam. And the weather was what made events unexpected.

The plan was to take a boat from Halong Bay to the Island of Camp Ba. However, the authorities deemed the wind too strong for tourist boats to go out, and a decision was made: Either stay overnight in Halong town (which is a rather eventfree and ugly place) and hope against hope for better weather the following day; or head south to Ninh Binh, and there take a canoetrip along the river and its surrounding hills and rice patties. We who-

leheartedly choose the latter, but before we took off we stopped for coffee. Or so I thought.

Apparently Vietnam is the second largest (after Brazil) exporter of coffee in the world, and we were handed several samples, more than I care to recall, of what different kinds of coffee they had to offer. But no, it wasn't different selections of beans and roasting techniques, various methods of harvesting or drying or any other way of making coffee taste differently. No, here they use coffee and mix it with one or more of ingredients such as sugar, condensed milk, coconut, cocoa, fruits and so on. And they do

so right with the beans, leaving no choice for the consumer. Never have I wanted a proper black coffee so badly.

With a few more hours on the bus we arrived for a late dinner, resulting in an early night. The stairs at the hotel went in all directions, twisting and turning, with dead ends and unexpected plateaus. It was like it was designed by M.C. Escher.

Next morning we set out on the Ngo Dong river, being gently rowed (by foot, rather than hand) upstream, past rice patties and steep limestone cliffs, egrets and fishermen, bridges and hawkers. At some points we even went underground for some unexpected caving. The floating salespeople were, as usual, very persistent, and since it was already past 10 o'clock, I figured I'd go for a beer while gently being rowed down the stream. A soft and slightly touristy way to compensate for the lack of seeing the islands of Halong Bay, and soon we left one former Vietnamese capitol in favour of the current.



Traders of the Ngo Dong River



Egret

Anagram#2

Early in the morning, citizens of the Vietnamese capital go to one of the many parks in Hanoi to do their morning exercise. A loosely adapted mix of Tai Chi, aerobics and dancing (not totally unlike what they do on town squares in Cambodia) is what the majority does, but since badminton is quite popular in Vietnam, a few feathers get whipped around each morning as well. And that morning, one of the whippers was me.

After exercise follows breakfast. If you're in a hurry, or have very special requests (such as, you know, eggs or hot coffee) I wouldn't recommend going to the café run by Hua Sua school, which is staffed by students of a school for disadvantaged youth. The food was delicious, though, but make sure you go there for lunch or dinner, when you've plenty of time and are not overly hungry.

The French quarters, part of the Olde Towne, is where shopping is done. All kinds of handicrafts and knick-knacks from nearby China can be purchased. They also have weasel coffee. A dollar will let you have a taste of what coffee is like when the beans have passed through the digestive systems of a weasel. I can safely say that that was the best shat-out cup of joe I've ever had.



Morning badminton



For dinner we visited a nearby restaurant with all the solemnity and cosiness of a Bavarian brewhouse. I was recommended the pork balls, and after having been reassured it wasn't actual pig's testicles, but rather something similar to Swedish meatballs, I gave it a try. All I can say is: I don't like spam!

The first try to get to the Ho Chi Minh Complex (the governmental area, including the mausoleum and embalmed body of Ho Chi Minh himself) was postponed due to a visit from none less than the president of Chile. The following attempts were thwarted by lack of opening hours and/or a vastness of people

The facts were these:

HANOI, the capital of Vietnam, and also its second largest city, is a fascinating blend of East and West, with Chinese influence from centuries of dominance, and French design from its colonial past. It is largely unspoiled by modern architecture of the 1970s and 80s, and is now going through a modernization that is making it a rising star in Southeast Asia.

Invading forces from every direction agree: Hanoi makes a fine capital. It has held that title for more than a thousand years, through several invasions, occupations, restorations, and name changes. The Chinese conquered the imperial city of Dai La in 1408 and renamed it Tống Binh. Le Loi repelled the invaders in 1428 and applied the name of Le Thái Tō for his efforts, he received the crown and a slew of legends about his heroic exploits, many centred around the Hoan Kiem Lake in the Old Quarter. The Nguyen Dynasty gave the city its modern name of Ha Noi in 1831, but they had transferred power to Hue by then; it remained there until 1887, when the French made Hanoi the capital of all Indochina. It changed hands again in 1954, when it was ceded to Ho Chi Minh and the Viet Minh after almost a decade of fighting, and it became the capital of North Vietnam; upon reunification in 1975, it assumed that title for the entire country.

resulting in some estimated two hours in line.

An old tradition (or old charter, or something) in northern Vietnam is the art of water puppet performance. Even though it was in Vietnamese, the various stories of harvests, fishing, karpis turning into dragons and other significant events in everyday traditional Cham life were pretty straightforward and easy to understand, and the skill of the puppeteers left nothing to desire.

Although our little group had been decimated throughout the Vietnamese leg, and most of us would continue together, it was nevertheless time to have our last supper together to say farewell to Annika and the three generations of aussies, and of course to Tuyen. Koto, a learning restaurant similar to Friends in Cambodia, offered great service and an extremely yummy seabass, before we took off to a small club featuring a rather bland live band. Bland,



iPhoo

that is, until the unexpected guest appearance of an excellent, modest and ruggedly handsome Swedish guest vocalist.

Applause, handshakes and promises of record contracts follo-

wed. Will I pursue a career in the South East Asian record industry? Will I move to Hanoi? Nay, on the contrary; I will leave Hanoi and cross the border to yet another country: Laos.

Tuyen, Joan,
Chez, Martin



#38

Finally I have more visited countrys in my belt than years. From Vinh, a sleepy Vietnamese town fairly close to the border, we passed customs and a little river and entered Laos.

Though somewhat similar to its neighbours Thailand, Cambodia and Vietnam, Laos differs significantly on one important issue: The population is merely 6 million, with its capitol Vientiane sporting rouhgly 750 000, making Laos by far the less crowded place in South East Asia. With three major peoples, the Lao Loum (Low Lao*), the Lao Theung (Middle Lao*) and the Lao Sung (High Lao*), many different tri-



bes, and influences from all the neighbours, Laos is a cultural melting pot.

First stop of this Laotian** Leisure Line was Vientiane, thus spelled as the French thought appropriate to spell Wieng Chan, meaning city of sandelwood, or possibly moon. A cosy little capitol, with a high concentration of international eateries, including a Scandinavian Bakery, spread along what would have been a rather picturesque riverfront walk, had the Mekong not been so low due to dry season.

With Beerlao's dark lager in the glass, the Vientianese nightlife was explored. As often is the case, the bars tend to close at midnight (or often even earlier), but one hard-to-find joint didn't: The bowling alley was open (as far as we know) all night, and served as the watering hole for the locals.

A morning city walk took us to some local sights, including That Dam stupa, Wat Si Saket temple (housing almost 7000

buddhas), the presidential palace and Patuxai, which is basically a Laotian** Arc de Triomphe.

As a result of primarily American involvement during their war against Vietnam, Laos suffers from one of the highest concentration of unexploded and undetected cluster bombs in the world. Ever since the war ended, the Lao have had the constant threat of accidently treading on one of the remaining bombies, as they call them. By accident, or by desperately and ignorantly collecting the bombs for scrap metal, millions have been killed, maimed or otherwise seriously injured since 1975. That is why the COPE foundation exists; to educate the locals on the dangers, to inform the rest of the world of the situation, to work on banning landmines and clusterbombs globally, to rehabilitate victims and to manufacture aid such as prosthetics and wheelchairs. A visit to COPE was conducted before having lunch and dessert.***

The facts were these:

VIENTIANE is the capital and largest city of Laos, situated on the Mekong River near the border with Thailand. Vientiane became the capital in 1563 due to fears of a Burmese invasion. During French rule, Vientiane was the administrative capital and, due to economic growth in recent times, it has now become the economic centre of Laos.

The estimated population of the city is 754,000 (2009). The city hosted the 25th Southeast Asian Games in December 2009 celebrating the 50 years of SEA Games.

The name of the city is derived from Pali, the liturgical language of Theravada Buddhism. In modern Lao, the meaning of the name Vientiane is ambiguous. The alternative meanings "city of the moon", or "city of sandalwood" are championed, because the words for 'moon' (chandra in Sanskrit) and 'sandalwood' (chandana in Sanskrit) are written and pronounced identically as 'chan' in modern Lao.

The great Laotian epic, the Phra Lak Phra Lam, claims that Prince Thattaradtha founded the city when he left the legendary Lao kingdom of Muong Inthapatha Maha Nakhone because he was denied the throne in favor of his younger brother. Thattaradtha founded a city called Maha Thani Si Phan Phao on the western banks of the Mekong River; this city was said to have later become today's Udon Thani, Thailand. One day, a seven-headed Naga told Thattaradtha to start a new city on the eastern bank of the river opposite Maha Thani Si Phan Phao. The prince called this city Chanthabuly Si Sattanakhanahud; which was said to be the predecessor of modern Vientiane.

*) Named thus, not according to social status, but rather to altitude

**) Pronounced Lay-ocean, naturally

***) Or should I say 'fika'?



Cluster bomb portrayal

Ah, lunch: Water buffalo filet, grilled with perfection to medium rare with crispy wedgies and smooth, creamy mushroom sauce. Everyone at the table got their orders at the same time, precisely as they had ordered, and even to the right person! Excellent service and the tastiest buffalo I've ever had. In Laos.

Ah, dessert: The Scandinavian bakery offered strong, hot, black cof-

fee and semlor. So, yeah, I had a semla. With whipped cream on the tip of my nose afterwards, as per old tradition.

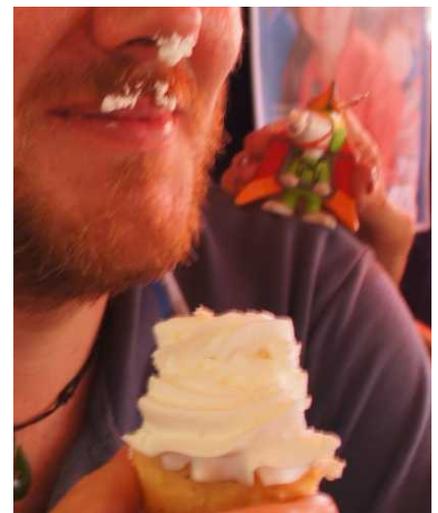
Too much whipped cream and the gym should be your next destination. In Laos, they've taken the SE Asian practice of public park based aerobics to the next level; in the vicinity of the plaza used for group exercise, the park is conveniently equipped with gym machines. Anyone who wants their

sixpacks, or their biceps tuned, or simply get rid of those extra love-handles, head down to Royal park and work it out!

After walking, not along the Mekong, but actually on its riverbed, watching the due to slight fog caused by the burning of vegetation not too impressive sunset, dinner and drinks, the last night in this cosy and wonderfully relaxed capitol was over, and with my bag of 'Godis' from IKEA the public bus (although pretty much every passenger was a backpacker) took



Royal Park



River Xong

off towards Vang Vieng. A public bus transported our little crew (consisting of, in addition to the original quintet, Australian cousins Julie and Lyn and their husbands Gordon and Trevor, headed by tourleader Gong from Bangkok) from Vientiane to Vang Vieng, the Queenstown of Laos. As such, the bus was filled with more backpackers than what would be a healthy dose, some of them more hygienic than others. Smelly McFartypants added an extra dimension to the journey. Luckily I sat quite a few rows away from him, but others (eg Isa, who seems to always get the short straw when it comes to adjacent people with musky smells) had to deal with an endless stream of unwelcome servings of intestinal byproducts.

Ah, yes; Vang Vieng. The Queenstown of Laos, indeed, what with the rock climbing, the kayaking, the mountain biking and the river rafting. But also the weed and the relaxed approach to it and all. Almost every bar/restaurant has their low tables on platforms, making you essentially sit on a raised floor, which is very relaxing and hard to fall down from. They also have tv:s showing DVDs on endless repeat of American comedy shows (I would estimate ca 80% Friends, 15% Family guy, 3% South Park and 2% others), making it easy to relax and have a laugh. And of course, the relaxing, the giggles and the not falling off chairs is due to catering to those who order from the special menus: Happy this and magic that, including straight out joints of weed and opium-laced



cigarettes.

The special menus are the main reason why Vang Vieng's most popular activity is so hazardous. Tubing, in and of itself, is one of the most harmless things you can do. Gently floating down the stream on an inflatable rubber ring, taking in the scenery and just chilling out can, and should, be done by anyone; children and elderly and everybody in between.



One of the pit stops while tubing

Add low water and unpredictable rocks, however, and scratches and bruises might come, add high water and the currents become tricky. Add water slides, jumping towers, zip lines and tarzan swings, and even the best of us can get a mishap, or accident even. Add bars with cheap beer and free shots, and the risk of getting seriously injured gets ever more present. And that was as far as I went. Those who have died while tubing in Laos have, to a very high extent, indulged in something from the special menus.

But since I didn't, I survived, and was ready for another day, this time of the more Queenstown and less Nimbin variety.

A longshaw picked us up and drove the bumpy, unfinished and incredibly dusty roads upriver, where a short trek took us to a cosy little village, with fowl and livestock happily trotting about. On with the headtorches and into the tubes we got, grabbing hold of the rope and pulling ourselves into the depth of the mountain.



Chez tubing down the stream

Underground tubing is a great way of exploring the plentiful limestone caves in the area. Even though the bats were unpresent and the water a bit chilly, it was still a cool experience.

Some caves don't have rivers in them, and are easily accesible by foot. In those cases, the locals aren't late to make a temple out of them, especially if one of the stalagmites kinda sorta resembles an elephant.

To get back to Vang Vieng, one could choose the waterway, and so

down Nam Xong we kayaked, without capseys... kapsize... quap-seis... tipping over. Gently taking in the breathtaking Laotioan landscape, we floated downstream, past the tubing bars we had frequented the day before and eventually, after a beer- and pastis break at Slingshot bar, getting back to Vang Vieng town.

Unfortunately, the days went by too quickly and the wheels on the bus wanted to go round and round, thus forcing us to leave this cosy, relaxed and very cool little town and head on, journeywise.

Party on, dudettes!



The facts were these:

VANG VIENG is a tourism-oriented town in Laos, located in Vientiane Province about four hours bus ride north of the capital. The town lies on the Nam Song river. The most notable feature of the area is the karst hill landscape surrounding the town.

Vang Vieng was first settled around 1353 as a staging post between Luang Prabang and Vientiane. Originally named Mouang Song after the body of the deceased King Phra Nha Phao of Phai Naam was seen floating down the river, the town was renamed Vang Vieng during French colonial rule in the 1890s. Significant expansion of the town and its infrastructure occurred during the 1964-73 Vietnam War when the US developed an Air Force base and runway that was used by Air America. The airstrip was then called 'Lima site 6'. In more recent times, the town has grown substantially due to the influx of backpackers attracted by the opportunities for adventure tourism in a limestone karst landscape.

Vang Vieng has become a backpacker-oriented town, with the main street featuring guest houses, bars, restaurants, internet cafes, tour agencies and western tourists. Attractions of the town include inner tubing and kayaking on the Nam Song River, which is lined with bars selling Beer Lao and Lao-Lao, and equipped with rope swings, zip lines, and large decks for socializing.

River runs shallow

Once the capitol of Laos, Luang Prabang has lost its supposed former metropolitan flare, and is now a small, quaint and cosy town, situated where the rivers Mekong and Namkhong meet.

The rivers are what give Luang Prabang its atmosphere; sunset cruises, kayaking and fishing are on display at the numerous tour providers, the many restaurants offer various versions of seafood and the markets are filled with river fish, some dried, some kept alive in little tanks, and some just dead.

To get to Luang Prabang from Vang Vieng, the reasonably short distance of 250 km could be made comfortably in two and a half hours. If it was central Europe we were talking about. But the Laotian infrastructure wants differently: Narrow, windy (and probably windy) roads serpentine their way through the beautiful mountains, and potholes is the rule rather than the exception. Tar-

paulin is sparse, and bumps are aplenty, and so the seven hour journey is a pleasant one for the eye, but not for the arse.

Speaking of sore body parts, every third shop in Luang Prabang (the others are restaurants and travel agents) seems to be a massage parlour. The Laotian full body will only cost you 35 000 kip (roughly €3,50) and is well worth it, and a perfect follow-up to the sunset cruise upon the river we took.

Being a mountainous region, there are plenty of beautiful waterfalls to visits. Being the end of the dry season, however, none but one had actual water to offer. Kueang Si waterfall was very scenic, its many pools very refreshing and its rope swing very worth the waiting in line. And to boot, they had a bear rescue centre close by, which is always cool.

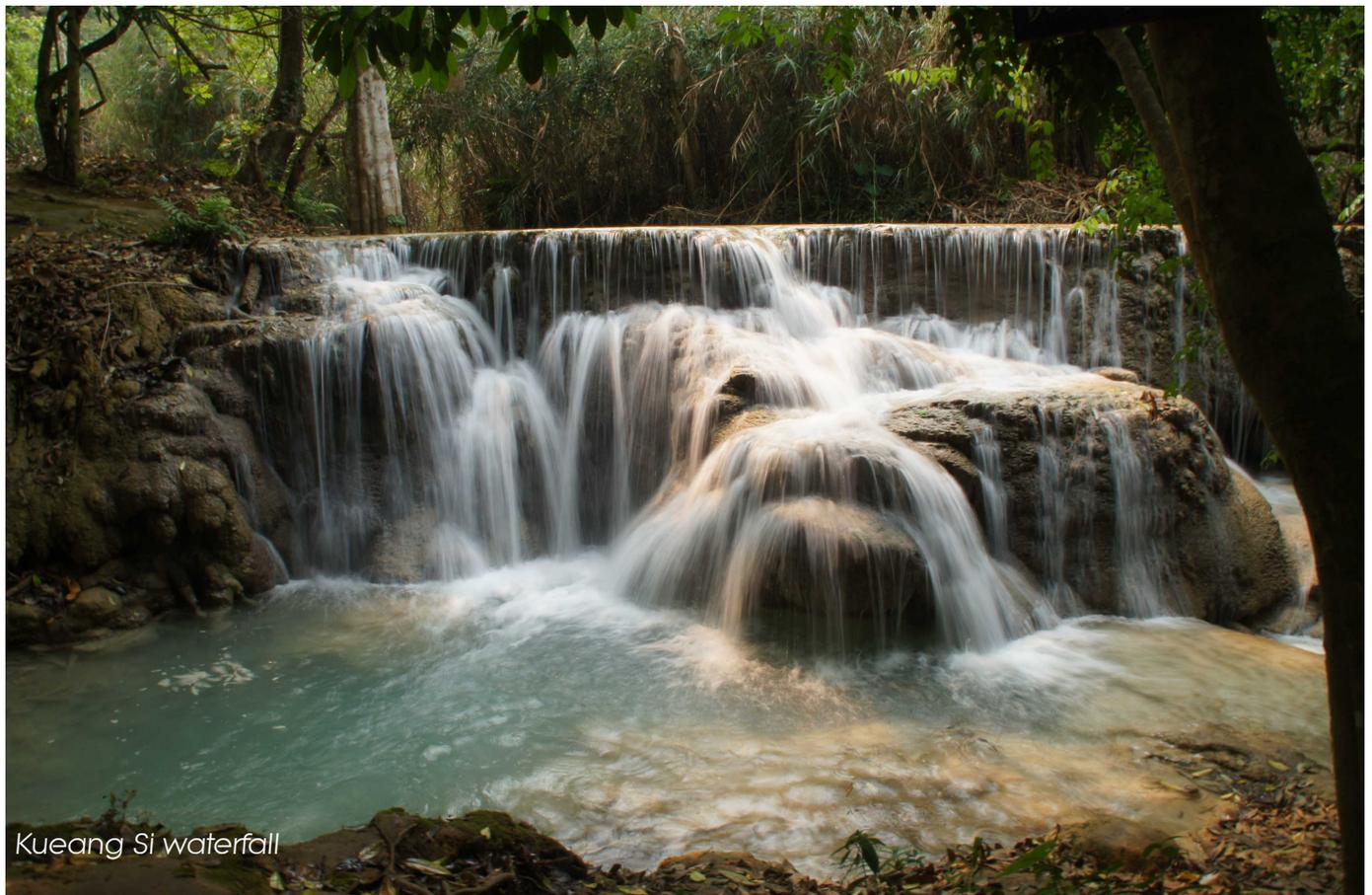
With two rivers meeting, Luang Prabang is a natural trading town for the area. As such, both the morning market with its plethora of fish, vegetables, meat and



Yet another sunset on the Mekong

birds* and the night market with its vast selection of arts and handicrafts and tacky t-shirts are crowded and busy. And at the nightmarket I got the presents I needed for my niece and nephew, so that was all sorted.

*)Not only chicken, but they also provide small, caged birds the SE Asians use to set free in order to get good luck



Kueang Si waterfall

Our own private riverboat



And the story of the Mekong continues. Our method of travelling out from Laos and cross the border back to Thailand was by riverboat, slowly making its way upstream. Compared to the bumpy minivan rides along the not quite finished roads, this is one way of travelling in style. At ridiculous o'clock the others got up



to feed the monks, and slightly later we all got ready to board our own private riverboat, preparing for our two days cruise to the Thai border. Though not much was happening, the river cruise was indeed relaxing. Lots of talking, delicious Latioan on-board lunch buffet, beer and pastis and a few games of Werewolf. After a visit to the Buddha cave, watching the buffaloes (and some albino buffaloes) bathing in the shallow waters and seeing the locals panning for some of the gold the Mekong is supposedly full of, we reached shore and

spent the night at the sleepy little town of Pakbeng. Sleepy, except for the Hive, a bar where Kim, Isa and I went and somehow concocted a cunning plan to get free shots: Isa and I were newly married and was on our honeymoon with Kim, who played the part of Isa's mum and therefore my mother-in-law. The charade worked (even though they questioned the curious fact that we were from three different countries) and we enjoyed our free shots. The following day was fairly similar to the previous, and we crossed the border to Thailand, having dinner and accomodation in the border town of Chiang Khong.

The facts were these:

LUANG PRABANG, or Louangphrabang (Literally: "Royal Buddha Image (in the Dispelling Fear mudra)," is a city located in north central Laos, at the confluence of the Nam Khan river and Mekong River about 425 km north of Vientiane. It is the capital of Luang Prabang Province. The population of the city is about 50,000. The city was formerly the capital of a kingdom of the same name. Until the communist takeover in 1975, it was the royal capital and seat of government of the Kingdom of Laos. It is a UNESCO World Heritage Site. The main part of the city consists of four main roads located on a peninsula between the Nam Khan and Mekong rivers. The city is well known for its numerous Buddhist temples and monasteries. Every morning, hundreds of monks from the various monasteries walk through the streets collecting alms. One of the major landmarks in the city is a large steep hill on which sits Wat Chom Si.



Isa and the barmaid's daughter

Chiang Mai oh my

The facts were these:

CHIANG MAI, sometimes written as "Chiengmai" or "Chiangmai", is the largest and most culturally significant city in northern Thailand. It is the capital of Chiang Mai Province, a former capital of the Kingdom of Lanna (1296–1768) and was the tributary Kingdom of Chiang Mai from 1774 until 1939. It is located 700 km north of Bangkok, among the highest mountains in the country. The city is along the Ping River, a major tributary of the Chao Phraya River. Chiang Mai means "new city" and was so-named because it was the new capital, founded in 1296, succeeding Chiang Rai (founded 1262) in the capital of the Lanna kingdom.

Chiang Mai's historic importance is derived from its close proximity to the Ping river and major trading routes.

While officially the city (thesaban nakhon) of Chiang Mai only covers most parts of the Mueang Chiang Mai district with a population of 160,000, the urban sprawl of the city now extends into several neighboring districts. This Chiang Mai Metropolitan Area has a population of nearly one million people, more than half the total of Chiang Mai Province.

The city is subdivided into four wards (khwaeng): Nakhon Ping, Srivijaya, Mengrai, and Kawila. The first three are on the west bank of the Ping River, and Kawila is located on the east bank. Nakhon Ping district comprises the north side of the city. Srivijaya, Mengrai, and Kawila consist of the west, south, and east respectively. The city center—within the city walls—is mostly within Srivijaya ward.

Crowdsurfing the Styx

From one Chiang to another. From Khong to Mai. My last stop before heading home.

Two minivans brought us there, one greyer than the other. An unexpected sign by the side of the road caught my eye, which seemed to say 'Cabbages and Condoms', but surely I must have misread it? Shouldn't it rather say 'Cottages and Condoes'? But my eyes had

not deceived me, for that was indeed our lunchspot.

But the more interesting stop of the day was yet to come. The white, sparkling and, just as Bender's metal ass, shiny temple of Wat Rong Khun glittered in the sunlight and welcomed us with its unorthodox gatekeepers. Dragons, monsters, Predator and general demons implied that we were in hell, and the of human skulls, bones

and reaching hands filled river endorsed that perception.

Unlike Styx, though, there was no Charon to ferry you across, but rather a bridge, and it led you from hell to heaven, from despair to hope and into a buddhist temple.

Though decidedly tempted out for this trip, this was a unique one, and possibly the best one. In front of the obligatory buddha statue there was a meditating monk, keeping



Hats are allowed outside the temple

perfectly still. Maybe too perfectly still, and it turned out to be an extremely life-like wax doll. The walls were, as is customary in temples, covered with paintings depicting stories or events of the reigning mythology. But here there were no apsaras dancing or Siddarthas meditating under a tree, no, here modern mythology had taken over. The number of geek pop references was hard to determine, but amongst the very intricate motifs were such stars as Jabba the Hutt, Harry Potter, an angry bird and Neo. With the buddhist temple of heaven, hell and geekdom done, the caravan of silver minivans continued, and soon Chiang Mai was there. Isa and I ventured out to check out activities and do some market shopping, and later, as the rainclouds became increasingly more threatening, we all gathered for this the last farewell dinner. Afterwards, as the older people went to bed, the younger of us went in search of a bar that was still open (note that nightlife is not big in northern Thailand, not even in a city of Chiang Mai's size). Splashing through the puddles of water, eventually we heard a coverband playing Radiohead, and so we had our final drinks while listening to The Harmonica Lewinskys.

After the disappointing experience with the class of Khmer cuisine in Siem Reap, it was with sensible caution I approached the Thai cooking class Isa and I had signed up for, but we were to be pleasantly surprised. The teacher was great and inspiring, the group was small enough, the whole thing well organized and



Thai cooking class, with stir-fried chicken and cashews

the food was delicious.

And then, Isabelle tuktucked to the airport, and even fewer of my co-travellers remained. Chez was still around, though, and after watching the obligatory Muay Thai (Thai boxing) we spent a whole day in the treetops in rural Mae Rim: Ziplining, abseiling, and other wire- and rope-related activities filled the day



Muay Thai in Chiang Mai



Ziplining in Mae Rim

bar a visit to, and drink at, the ridiculously lavish Four Seasons resort.

And drinks were sometimes hard to come by. Due to the ongoing election a beer ban was set upon the bars, which was extremely frustrating when we turned the corner and saw what always lies there, in every town. No Guinness for me this time either, unfortunately.

Eventually, though, came the day of departure and I was back from Mae Rim. The tuktuk took me straight to O'Malley's, and stout was had. Wandering in the neighbourhood of my former city hotel, I sat down for a late lunch and was just about to leave when a familiar face came walking down the street. Kim was just returning from her cooking class, and we had a final beer before I took a tuktuk to the airport, slowly realizing the trip was coming to an end.

Going up

Pressure < 50 bar. Time to ascend.

One last panang and off to the airport, where everything went surprisingly smooth. Not too long or short time between flights, no crying/kicking babies next to me, no lost luggage. And when I passed customs at Landvetter, my dad was there, ready to give me and my stuffed backpacks a ride home.

I was Wat Weary and Temple Tired. I needed rest from rice and had 'nuff of noodles. I was sick of the sun and bored of the beaches.

No, that's not really true, but as all good things must do, so must this trip come to an end.

As always, I don't regret a second of it. The stunning subaquatic scenery, the crowded cities, the billions of scooters, the bottled water, the bottles of watery beer, the heat and humidity, the language barriers, the friendliness of the locals, the awesomeness of the

co-travellers, the culture clashes, the stress and relaxation, the list goes on. And on. And on, as does my heart.

Kawp khun ka, akun, gum urn and kowp jai I bid to south east Asia, and can once again establish that this was my best. Trip. Ever!

This century.

At least top 30.



The Backpacks 2012

BACKPACK	FOR....	....AND THE BACKPACK GOES TO....	OTHER NOMINEES:
The Cotton backpack	....best accomodation	Homestay in Chambok	Bungalow in Khao Lak
The Plush backpack	....best transport	Riverboat up the Mekong	Night train to Nha Trang
The Glass backpack	....best hang	Various bars along the tubing	The small nightclub in Hanoi
The Rubber backpack	....best adventure experience	Diving by the Similans	Ziplining in Mae Rim
The Brick backpack	....best city	Hoi An	Vang Vieng
The Granite backpack	....best landscape	Koh Phi Phi (one has to disregard the tourists)	The Laotian Landscape
The Terry backpack	....best swim	Water fun in Sihanoukville	River with various aquatic challenges, Chambok
The Fur backpack	....best nature experience	The Andaman sea. Deep down.	Mekong Delta
The Khaki backpack	....best guide	Alann	Thida in Angkor Wat, and Roger the divemaster
The Silver backpack	....best eating	Seafood barbecue in Sihanoukville	Buffalo steak. Very yummy, yeah!
The Malt backpack	....best drink	Louisiane Brewhouse's ale	Free whisky buckets. Free is good!
The Gunpowder backpack	....best fireworks	Fireshow on the beach of Sihanoukville	
The Celluloid backpack	....best photo	Boy playing in the water, Tonle Sap	The river of hands, Wat Rong Khun
The Jade backpack	....best cultural experience	Water puppet show, Hanoi	Angkor Wat
The Nylon backpack	....best backpack	My daypack	The Intrepid bag
The Velour backpack	....softest experience	Riverboat up the Mekong	Hoi An
The Calico backpack	....best surprise	Wedding in Siem Reap	The popcultural referenes in Wat Rong Khun
The Magma backpack	....hottest chick	Lead Apsara in Temple Bar, Siem Reap	Certain co-travellers
The Vinyl backpack	....song of the tour	With or Without You - cover version	Wonderwall
The Reclining backpack	....best temple	Wat Rong Khun	Taproh, aka the Jungle Temple

And last, but not least....

The Gold backpackbest experience in total	Diving in the Andaman by the Similan islands	The people
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