

Journey Around the World

October 2000 – April 2001



SOUTHEAST ASIA

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15: Down the Mekong



We did not hear about the earthquake until days afterwards, when we were deep in Laos. Still our only news has been via E-mail. We've heard that Bhuj was the epicentre and has been flattened. And that from 10,000 to 100,000 people in Gujarat have lost their lives. We know the Earthwatch project staff are okay, but we're concerned about the elderly couple we met, the Clarks, who stayed on to tour Gujarat. Many of the buildings we were in and the people we saw must be no more. Had the tremor come a week earlier, on the Friday we stayed at the Hotel Anam, we might have been among them.

We have not written about Bhuj. This is what it was like:

Old Bhuj is surrounded by massive walls. At its centre is the old city's only open space, a dusty patch below the crumbling masonry and elaborately carved windows of the Aina Mahal - the Old Palace. The walls and ceiling of the audience hall are a mosaic of tarnished mirrorwork which once reflected the lights of the candles floating on the miniature moat separating the monarch on his dais from the supplicants. The water also helped to cool the building and floated the model boats with which the Maharaja entertained himself and his guests.

Outside, old buildings and new overhang a maze of tiny passageways. Even the main bazaar is too narrow for cars: autorickshaws, scooters, cows, pigs, camels and people jostle past tiny shops. The beautiful tie-dye, blockprint and embroidered fabrics made in the villages of Kutch spill over low counters. Barbers and sweet merchants alternate with shops so specialised that it could take a week to track down the one which sells exactly the spare motor part or variety of dhal you seek.

Hawk-nosed men wearing white cotton jhodpurs, smocks and turbans, with huge studs in their ears, barter for knives. Tribal women in full red skirts and backless blouses throng the silver bazaar. Since they are semi-nomadic they wear the family's wealth. They are buying anklets the size of prisoners' shackles, armbands like gauntlets, massive chokers and ear ornaments, and ten-centimetre nose rings so heavy that they are supported with a lock of hair pulled down between the eyes. Down an alley near the city gate, we find a gaudy temple on one side and a dank stairway up to an internet cafe on the other. Outside the gate, the massive bastions are painted with advertisements for washing powder and cigarettes. There is a walled lake with pelicans, and the bus station, banks and hotels of modern Bhuj sprawl out into the dusty scrubland of Kutch. On the very edge of the city, beyond the gypsy encampment are the chatris - the thousand-year-old cenotaphs of past rulers, with their gracefully decorated arches and cupolas. Are they still standing?

Onwards. We were just 500 metres from Laos, fifty seconds by one of the long canoes with the absurdly gross outboard engines with their darning-needle propellers projecting over the stern that ferry people across the Mekong to the town of Houay Xai. From the thatched terrace of our riverside restaurant-guesthouse in Chiang Khong, on the Thailand side, we observed this scene while we waited for our visas. The guide book information was out of date: though visas are now cheaper, they take two days to process instead of one. And, as the girl at the hotel informed us when we arrived, our passports had to be submitted before 3 pm. It was then 2.45. We rushed to fill out application forms and rummaged through our packs for photos. The girl seized our documents, hopped onto a motorbike, and roared up the lane. We did not see her again that night, nor the next day, and began to wonder whether this was altogether a sensible thing we had done.

Still, Chiang Khong was a pleasant little town with a lively market, brightened by the saffron robes of the gangs of teen-age monks 'hanging out', and the tiny tribal village women with their richly embroidered cummerbunds and waistcoats and the colourful cloths folded onto their heads like turbans. We bought strange dun-coloured fruits which looked like lumpy sausages and with sticky seeds inside that tasted like prunes; they turned out to be tamarinds. Thinking it was a conical woven cap like the Orissa fishermen wear, Judith tried out a wicker dust pan on her head. At mealtimes our riverside perch above the

border post offered constant diversion for the eye - and the taste buds, as we ate our way through the various versions of fried rice and Thai soups on the menu, and sank a few cold Tiger beers into the sunsets.



Day three in Thailand dawned, the day we had been promised our visas, but it appeared that they would not be delivered for another hour or two, because the bus from Bangkok had been delayed. We had had no idea that our passports had been on a fifteen-hour bus ride to the capital and back again, in God-knew-whose custody. But this explained the 3 pm deadline and the girl dashing off on the motorbike.

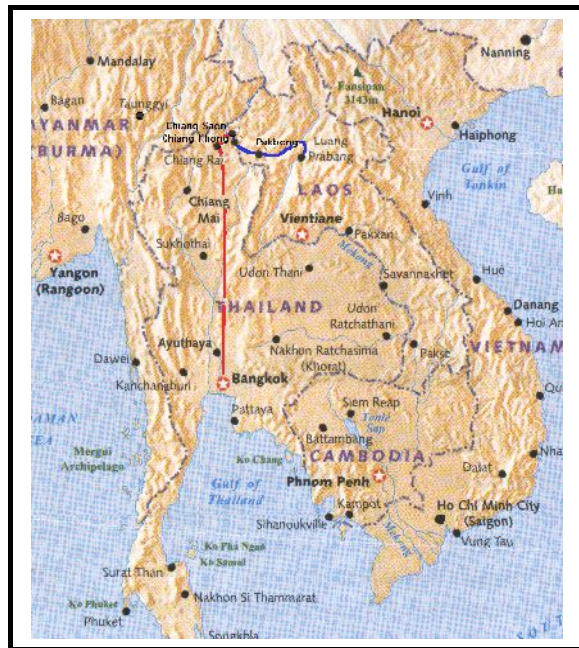
Sure enough, our passports materialised with visas issued in Bangkok, at 10.45 am. Too late for us to catch the last 'slow boat' down river that day, I remarked to our landlady. Not at all, she replied. Because of the delay to the bus a travel agency which had some clients in the same predicament had arranged for the boat to be delayed until 11.30. This story must have been confused with a private boat

hire, as no such eminent personages appeared later. Nevertheless, the panic button was pressed. We could see there was no queue at the Thai emigration hut, so we dashed down and glided through the formalities. Minutes later we were gliding across the Mekong, and fifty seconds after that, trooping up the steps to the Laos immigration office. I didn't bargain with the tuk-tuk driver but paid the first price he asked to take us two kilometres upstream to the 'slow boat' landing.

We arrived at 11.30. At the river bank was a narrow fifty-foot launch packed with foreign tourists, with their backpacks piled onto the roof. A handful of other travellers were lolling on the slope, and as we hurried down the strand, they, too, filed up the plank and somehow squeezed onto the boat. A man squatting on the shore waved us away. "No more. Full up", he said, or gestures to that effect. "When is the next boat?" we asked. "Monday", he said. Today was Saturday. Was this man the skipper? An official of the Lao Navigation Board? A member of the Communist secret police? A kibbitzer? The boat's engine started up and a boatman went to remove the boarding plank. I thrust 1000 baht (£16) into his hand, propelled Judith up the plank and followed her. The man squatting on the bank did absolutely nothing, the plank was lifted, the boat chugged off, and as there was no space available within, we clambered up on the roof, where we had an excellent viewing position, and where the boatman found me and gave me 150 baht change.

It is a two-day trip to Louang Prabang. The first stage is a seven-hour journey downstream to the village of Pakbeng. At first the river is broad and placid. The lighter patches on the green forested hills are thickets of bamboo and there is the blush of the occasional coral tree. We passed by villages of huts constructed with bamboo and palm thatch and built on teakwood stilts. A few men fished with nets and bamboo rods; a few women washed clothing at the riverside or tended the small bamboo-fenced plots planted with beans, lettuce, onions and tobacco. Children splashed and played in the river alongside water buffalo, black or fawn-coloured, dozing in the stream with only their snouts breaking the surface. It is a perfect environment for wading birds, but we saw none. The total bird life count in the course of the day was six plovers and two swallows. A local told us the birds had been frightened away by the bomb blasts of 'the American War' and never returned. Or maybe the locals eat them.

No longer the border with Thailand, the river narrows. Sometimes it is no more than 100 metres wide and the channel between the black sawtooth rocks shrinks to less than fifty. There are about sixty passengers on board: a few Lao women huddle in the forward cabin behind the helmsman and the boat puts in specially to a remote village to drop off an orange-robed monk; the rest are foreign tourists, mostly young. As the sun climbs more of the backpackers hoist themselves on to the roof. The quaint Lao religious taboo against women sitting above a man is blithely ignored. The tourists also pay scant attention to the magnificent scenery unreeling all around them; they sprawl senselessly in the sun, they read Stephen King novels, they plug in their Walkman and close their eyes. Meanwhile, the brown river turns east. Rapids churn angrily. At the approach to some of these, a boatman pops his head up and waves us all down from the roof. Oldies comply, of course, and a few others, but mostly the backpackers ignore him and the top-heavy boat pitches and yaws through the white water.



At dusk, sun-soaked and still rolling with the rocking of the boat we were decanted into the set of a Wild West film. Hucksters swarmed about the boat offering services and substances both legal and illegal. Wooden shacks lined the steep dirt road - guest houses, restaurants, shops and stalls, and homes where there was no furniture except a television set. As the last to board, we were the first to wrestle our packs off the boat and marched swiftly into the only concrete building, a basic hotel where for 80 Thai baht (about £1.50 - we still had no Laotian currency) we secured a simple room with a spectacular view of the muddy river bending into the distant purple mountains. There were no lights

yet. The electric generator powering the village is switched on only from 6 to 9 p.m.

We had been concerned about immigration procedures. According to our guide book, only three years old, foreigners were compelled to have their passports stamped upon entry and departure at every overnight stop. However, we saw no facilities for accomplishing this annoyance. Stimulated by the attractions of the tourist dollar, communist Laos seems to have recently relaxed its strict controls.

We awoke to cocks crowing, a misty dawn and in our glassless picture window the snaking river glowed a vivid pink. At breakfast we also provisioned for lunch with baguette sandwiches freshly prepared by a lady at a stall. Our Ship of Fools ploughed on through ever higher, increasingly beautiful green mountains, past villagers bathing, laundering, fishing, or panning for gold. The rocky passages were more constricted and the rapids wilder, but our fellow backpackers remained largely oblivious. Few of them witnessed the most dramatic instance of local colour when a corpse floated quietly alongside. He was a small brown man, face up, wearing loose black trousers and a blue-checked shirt tightly buttoned over a ballooning belly. The boat chugged past without a pause. Imagine the fuss that would have been created on the Ouse or the Tamar.

In the late afternoon the Nam Ou river added its pure green flow under soaring limestone cliffs, the brown Mekong made a complete horseshoe turn, and swept us in to the peninsula separating it from another tributary, the Nam Khan. The steep banks were planted with vegetable gardens. Above reposed the solid French colonial villas, the modest teak and bamboo houses and the golden-spired temples of the ancient royal city of Louang Prabang tinged with the rosy glow of the setting sun.

16. Up the Nam Ou



While we talked Mr Tongdee drew figures in the sand with a stick - in U.S. dollars, in Thai baht and in Lao kip. Eventually we negotiated a price of 5,000 baht (£ 80) for the hire of a boat upriver to Nong Khiaw and his services as a guide. He invited us into his home to set down the agreement on paper. It was just a two-storey shack, but occupied a superb position on the high bank overlooking the Mekong. His wife frowned at the sums while they both worked out their own costs. Mr Tongdee threw a last-minute wobbler with a request for us to pay for his food and overnight accommodation, which I parried with a smile. He gave us a copy of his note and we shook hands on it. A good deal. Or so we thought.

The old quarter of Louang Prabang, the ancient royal capital of Laos, reposes on a bluff in the junction of the Mekong and the Nam Khan. It is more town than city. A road loops around the peninsula and another bisects its length. These broad avenues are quiet; traffic is mostly bicycles, mopeds and autorickshaws. There are no buildings on the river side of the road, and no wharves. Paths wind down the steep bank and boats pull up to the muddy shore; where the slope is more gradual it is cultivated with vegetable gardens. Children play in the unsurfaced lanes that form a grid in the town centre beneath a temple-studded green hill. Nestled amongst the palm trees are solid colonial villas with balconies and shuttered windows and bamboo shacks on stilts of solid

teak with verandahs sheltered by an overhanging roof of wood tiles or corrugated metal.

Temples with golden spires and graceful sloping eaves, one folded over another, are the only buildings to rise above the trees. Local foot traffic passes through courtyards where young monks wearing orange robes - in shades from saffron to mustard - sweep the pavement with brooms made of brush or just sit around and chat. The royal palace is part of the neighbourhood, too, a modest square two-storey colonial structure set in landscaped grounds which open directly on to local streets. It is a museum now, kept as it was in 1975 when the Pathet Lao deposed - and disposed of - the monarch and his consort. Today, apart from the odd red flag with a gold hammer and sickle on it, there is nothing to tell you this is a Communist state. We saw no policemen, no officials. Everyone smiled, entrepreneurs peddled and pedalled happily, and the whole town dozed dreamily in the sun.

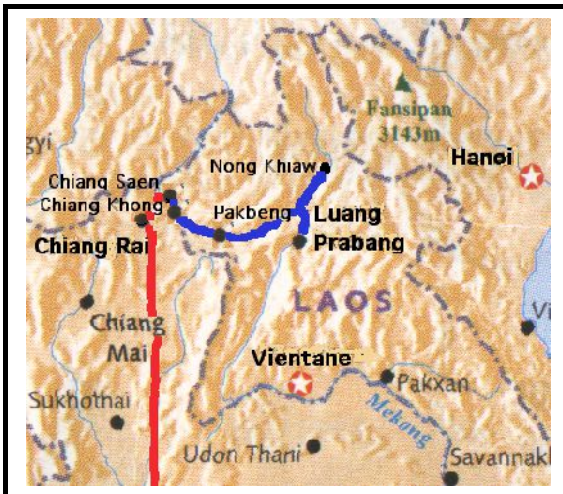
Each dawn is surreal. Cocks crow and there is the dull crescendo of a temple drum. Flocks of barefoot orange-robed monks descend from their eyries. Some carry black umbrellas as sun-shields; all tote a metal pot with a lid. As the sun rises each contingent pads silently in single file down the main street from the main temple, the Wat Xieng Maen. At the palace they turn and then promenade back along the Mekong. Small groups line the march, mostly kneeling women; the few males stand. Older monks head each monastery troop; the younger novices, identified by the loose belts they wear, follow behind. Initiates are recruited, we were told, at fifteen, but some looked no more than twelve. Each monk pauses by each waiting person, lifts the lid of his pot, receives a small handful of food - usually a dollop of sticky rice - and replaces the lid before shuffling forward to the next offering. When a squad of monks has passed the donors squat or sit back on low stools, gossiping until the next monastery cohort arrives. Within an hour the parade is over and the devout lay people roll up their mats and potter home to start the day, now one step closer to Nirvana. The monks, who have risen at four (with the aid of alarm clocks) and have been praying since, tuck into whatever breakfast pious serendipity has bestowed upon them. They then set about their household chores before lunching at 11.00 am. The rest of the day is spent in studies, including English, but a lot more hours are devoted to Sanskrit. They will not eat again until tomorrow's breakfast.

We watched this show most mornings, before breakfasting ourselves on our hotel terrace. We stayed first at the Hotel Ca Lao, a beautifully restored French colonial villa overlooking the Mekong, then moved for a few days to a delightful small French-owned hotel, the Duang Champa, on the other side of the peninsula, where we indulged in such colonial treats as imported pastis and vin rouge, steak frites and creme caramel. Beneath our balcony children frolicking in the shallow Nam Khan floated downriver on inner tubes. A perfect visual metaphor for the hours drifting by in Louang Prabang. We watched young men playing *kataw*, like volleyball, but with a rattan ball about six inches in diameter. They fielded it like a soccer ball, using only their heads, feet and knees with amazing dexterity. We visited the palace, the temples and the markets - including one where tiny tribal grannies in colourful costume sold fearsome home-made

knives, catapults, machetes and crossbows (for fishing) as well as their traditional cross-stitched fabrics and cutwork cushion covers.

In front of every cafe and many houses sit low, round concrete tables, surrounded by four arcs of benches and usually inlaid with a 100-square draughts board where the locals play with bottle caps, or munch noodle and rice dishes at every hour of the day. We lunched well, too, on glutinous wads of sticky rice, spring rolls, noodle soups, green papaya salad, watercress and egg salad and heavenly fresh fruit milkshakes. One day we had seen rice cakes drying on racks in the sun all over town, and when Judith asked if they were on the menu the waiter galloped off to fetch a couple from the nearest manufacturer. At dinner our favourite starter was called seaweed - actually river weed which is collected, dried, compressed into patties with chips of garlic and sesame seeds and lightly fried. Delicious.

Peter, a Swiss we had met on the "Ship of Fools", though a seasoned traveller, was so entranced by everything he saw in Louang Prabang that he dithered between staying on or joining our voyage up to the mountain village of Nong Khiaw. After we had made our arrangements with Mr Tongdee, Peter tracked me down at the Internet cafe to say he had decided to come. This was opportune, because when I knocked on Mr Tongdee's door afterwards his wife had obviously had a harsh word in his ear. He pulled a long face and said he had decided he could not go because the agreed price was too low. When I told him we were now a party of three, he broke into a smile and we struck a new deal. Owing to Peter's contribution, we paid less than originally. So, in Mr Tongdee's words, "Me happy. You happy. All peoples happy."



In a narrow craft with two boatmen, we first chugged an hour back up the Mekong to Pakou, a spooky cave where 2,000 Bhuddas of all sizes stare out at a spectacular view of the green Nam Ou seeping like watercolour paint into the brown Mekong beneath soaring limestone cliffs. For the next five hours we motored up rapids and poled through stony shallows past villages accessible only by river. Some have electric power, provided from small turbines driven by propellers suspended from bamboo frames in the rushing current. The banks and sandbars are planted with legumes, onions, peanuts and tobacco, all to be flooded soon when the April rains arrive. We saw just a few more birds here: little sanderlings, wagtails and a couple of kingfishers. The scenery grew more dramatic as the river twisted through ranks of limestone karst rising like sharks' teeth from lush jungle, strange jagged towers receding into the purple distance. Nong Khiaw appeared at dusk, straggling up a muddy bank and overwhelmed by majestic cliffs. We ate noodles like everyone else and slept in a rustic guest house

In the muffled white morning mist Mr Tongdee escorted us to the tiny market where we bought lunch provisions: packets of noodles and fried rice wrapped in banana leaves. At the local temple one monk was brewing rice wine while another enjoyed his first fag of the day. Soon the dirt lanes were crowded with children on their way to school. The girls wore a tidy blue uniform wrap-around Lao skirt and white blouse. Some children munched balls of sticky rice as they walked; others sat down briefly at stalls by the schoolyard gate to bolt down a bowl of sweet noodles in bright candy colours. Our own stall breakfast was a nourishing broth of noodles, spring onion, salad and chicken livers, brewed on an open fire.

As the Lao language is tonal we have not yet mastered a single word. Lao people, even if they have a reasonable command of English, ignore final consonants when they speak (and sometimes when they write signboards). So, for "Lao house" Mr Tongdee says "Lao hou", and he says "sticky ri" for "sticky rice", which derails comprehension. I thought he used the word "toilet" to an almost unhealthy degree until he drew to my attention a pair of "walking toilets". He meant "tourists".

Once more captivated by everything he saw, Peter was torn between remaining in this idyll and proceeding up river towards China, but we managed to coax him back into the boat. Dropping through some steep rapids he lost his cherished "New Zealand" baseball cap overboard, but was unable to persuade the skipper to turn our lurching craft back into the torrent. As he had recently lost another favourite cap labelled "South Africa", he was momentarily dejected. However, the next day he turned up smiling under headgear from a country called "Adidas".

We stopped to inspect a large abandoned cave where, according to Mr Tongdee, an American warplane had been shot down by Lao defenders. He showed us the crash site, an overgrown hole that was now a toilet (not a tourist). It would have been a bold pilot who tried to fly down that canyon, but the floor of the cave was littered with convincing metal fragments, including bullets.

We also inspected a Hmong village. Some of these people, the remnants of the mountain tribes enlisted by the CIA to combat the Viet Cong, still live as semi-nomads. They construct a teak and bamboo village by the river, including an open shack as a school, settle in it for ten years or so, and then move on. Families live in one large room furnished with floor mats and wicker containers for storing rice and clay pots for lao-lao "whiskey" (rice wine). Beneath the stilted houses the women set up looms for weaving fabrics. There is a separate shed for cooking and the bush is their toilet.

Mr Tongdee grew increasingly genial and provided a slag heap of information, some of it quite possibly correct. Sticky rice, he informed us at length, is a different grain from ordinary rice, or perhaps it isn't. It is grown only in the highlands, but is the staple everywhere. Most Lao families have ten or twelve children, though he has only six. He is 56 years old, his mother is 100, and

he is the third of six children. Until they are one year old infants have no name and are simply referred to as girl-baby or boy-baby. A pregnancy usually lasts nine months but can extend to twelve. His number one daughter is engaged to a Spaniard, or perhaps a Frenchman. This gentleman is coming back soon for the marriage ceremony. Number one daughter is happy. Mr Tongdee is happy. Lao people are happy to marry foreigners. (In truth we have seen several heavy-bellied middle-aged western men strutting about Louang Prabang cradling tender slips of slim-waisted Lao girls who, tottering on high heels, come up to their shoulders). About the only thing Mr Tongdee is not happy about is Americans. Not just because they drop a lot of bombs, but because he evidently has been bullied and belittled by some big Americans. As far as I could gather, one of them had suddenly dropped dead in a bar, which made Mr Tongdee happy.

17. The Backpacker Trail to Vientiane



Bert, the lanky Dutchman who wore the Foreign Legion style cap with the flap at the back, had decided against the overland journey. The road was too rough, he had been warned. You had to travel in a truck with a wooden bus body bolted on and the drivers were irresponsible. It was altogether too dangerous, so he had already booked a flight to Vientiane. Given the poor safety record of Lao Aviation and their lack of instrument landing equipment in this misty, mountain-bound country, I said it was more dangerous to fly. Bert had an answer for that: "You only hear about the plane crashes; you don't hear if a bus falls down the mountain". The Dane was apprehensive for another reason: his three-year-old guide book reported that bandits were still active, and a soldier often rode shotgun on the bus. Peter, the veteran Swiss traveller, who had once spent four days travelling on the floor of a freight wagon between Juba and Khartoum, was concerned only about getting a seat; he resolved to get to the bus terminal an hour early - whenever he got round to leaving. As the terminal was several kilometres outside of town none of us had actually been there. Mr Tongdee thought we should avoid the intermediate stop, Vang Vieng, altogether. It had too many 'toilets' (tourists); I would encounter 'no goo(d) wome(n) and no goo(d) me(n)' who would want to 'smo (smoke)' and 'sree (sleep)' with me and 'tay (take) money'. So Bert flew to Vientiane, Peter lingered in Louang Prabang, the Dane fretted, and we went alone to the bus station early one morning. Our

plan was to break the ten-hour journey to Vientiane part-way, spending just one night in the backpacker sin city of Vang Vieng.

We had to wait two hours, but there was a bus and we had our choice of seats. When the vehicle filled with bearded, sun-glassed, T-shirted, tattooed, nose-ringed western youth we realised we had now been swept into the mainstream of the backpacker current which circulates between Europe, the Antipodes and America. As there are no MacDonalds yet in this part of the world this nomadic tribe subsists on banana pancakes and packaged snacks. The world's happiest salesman must be the chap who has the south-east Asia territory for Pringles potato crisps, because every stall has a substantial stock of these tubes in limitless variety.

The road was fully paved, the driver was careful, there was no armed guard and we encountered no bandits. We drove along high ridges with spectacular views on both sides. Villages of wooden shacks perched on every saddle. Seas of pampas grass waving frothy heads flowed up the base of jagged towers of limestone karst marching into the blue distance. As usual the backpackers slept or read or gabbled without lifting their eyes to the windows.

At first glance Vang Vieng lived up to its poor advance notices. The bus disgorged its cargo of human jetsam at a concrete stall on the edge of what appeared to be a huge gravel car park. It was in fact, an airfield. During the 'American War' it had been known as Lima Two and was busy with warplanes; now it handles about two flights a year. We hoisted our backpacks with the rest of the crowd and trudged across. The little town of one and two-storey buildings was appealingly funky - cheap guest houses and cafes galore, of course, but the streets were broad, neat and quiet and we saw no desperados. As we walked through a pleasant market our dread mellowed into anticipation and when we arrived at the hotel we were aiming for we saw something which caused us to look at each other and say, "Let's stay a couple of nights - or maybe more."

A shallow river, the Nam Song, skirts the town, spilling over a stony bed. It is spanned by a rickety bamboo footbridge leading to a tree-lined lane which meanders through rice fields. Beyond those bright green lowlands fantastic purple shapes thrust into the sky, framing a glorious sunset. It is an idyllic backdrop of staggering beauty. There is no evidence of human occupation along the entire sweep of the opposite bank, yet the river itself swarms with activity. Water buffalo tread solemnly into the stream for a dip. Naked children jump and swim from the footbridge while their older siblings, wearing goggles and wielding crossbows, hunt for fish and their mothers launder clothes or harvest river weed from the stones. Peasants and tourists - on foot, on bicycles and mopeds, too - file across the bridge. Others waded in water up to their thighs, sometimes pushing bicycles through the flow. (There is a 1000 kip - [8 pence] toll to use the bridge.) Yet another means of gaining the opposite side is provided by wooden carts yoked to a small diesel engine mounted on wheels and steered by a long two-pronged handle, something like a motorised lawnmower. These contrivances ford the river, hauling six or eight passengers or a load of freight, cough and splutter to the other side, then jolt off through the shallows like racing

gigs harnessed to a berserk mechanical horse. Motorised canoes plough upriver; others float gently down with fishermen standing in the bows casting circular nets. A periodic flow of other mariners descends as well - spaced out young tourists reclining on inner tubes, smoking or holding cans of beer. Just when we thought no additional use could be imagined for this versatile river, a flotilla of giant bananas hove into view - inflatable yellow kayaks paddled by dripping wet youngsters - and then the bus we had arrived on drove into the middle of the river and a team of lads began to lather it and themselves.



We booked into the Whathana Nam Xong Bungalows and watched this scene from the terrace of its riverside restaurant for three sunsets. During the day we plunged into the backpacker scene - literally. We cycled through a fantastic landscape of rocky towers, past houses on stilts and leafless kapok trees festooned with fat green sausage-shaped fruits to a swimming hole. We dropped into it off a rope. We stopped at a roadside stall for a nourishing broth of glass noodles (made from sticky rice), cabbage, tomatoes and spring onion, with a heap of fresh crisp lettuce on the side. We climbed bamboo ladders and clambered over boulders to explore by torchlight huge caverns harbouring reclining Buddhas. We went on a bush walk and had a beach barbecue. We ventured one at a time across a swinging bamboo bridge, we sipped mulberry tea and rice wine at an organic silkworm farm, and yes, we bumped twelve kilometers down the shallow rapids in those yellow bananas. They proved to be perversely unsteerable, explaining why everyone was dripping wet. Our Swiss chum, Peter, of course turned up, took one look and wondered once more whether he should stay or go. So did we. But we never saw any prostitutes or rent boys. We debauched instead on delicious orange, banana, papaya, watermelon and pineapple milk shakes - and cold Lao beer.

Vientiane must be one of the few capital cities in the world where you wake up to cocks crowing. We were back on the Mekong here and once again in the misty distance across a broad stretch of brown water, there was Thailand. But Vientiane is not a river port. It lies on the outside of a sweeping curve of the Mekong and a vast flat sandbank has collected here. At the shoreline there is only a shallow stream in which people wade to fish with hand nets; other tiny figures stroll far out on the sand, or play football. The river bank simply falls away through elephant grass and a little cultivation. A few simple thatched roof restaurants offer an ideal viewing platform for an evening sundowner or an early breakfast. The dirt path at the top of the bank is lined with stalls which set out plastic chairs and tables under fluorescent strip lighting and prepare food and drink in electric woks and blenders - all powered by looping wires connected to the city's street lamps.

From the embankment unsurfaced lanes lead off at right angles to the few streets which comprise the city centre. At its heart is a sleepy square enclosing a disused fountain and a shuttered cafe. The tallest building in Vientiane is here, a

modern eight-storey office block, long abandoned, which used to be the headquarters of the French administration. In a building diagonally across the square was the U.S. Information Centre. Now it houses - guess what - the Vietnamese Cultural Centre.

The architecture of Vientiane is a mixture of decaying French Colonial villas, brash concrete Lao buildings with ornate balconies and bulging balustrades - mostly small hotels - and gilded temples set in spacious grounds. Most of these wats are not very old, as Vientiane was sacked by the Siamese in 1828. One which has survived from just before that time is the Wat Sisaket. Precisely because it is not boldly painted and gilded, but gently faded, it is a most charming building. Within a rectangular colonnaded cloister rows of life-size Bhuddas squat in watchful contemplation of a steep-roofed temple. Inside, its walls are honeycombed with niches in which hundreds of tiny Bhudda figures sit eyeballing each other.

At one of the garish new suburban temples a monk invited us to return in the evening to witness the 'basi' ceremony in which the devout seek ritual purification. This very personal devotion takes place in the very public atmosphere of a gay garden fete. Monks sit cross-legged, chanting, in the midst of lurid decorations: glittering tinsel, intricate constructions of banana leaves shaped into pyramids to mimic a small candle tree with white lilies or marigolds to represent the flames, and spinning electronic lights flashing multi-coloured designs like an amusement park advertisement. The faithful approach a sitting monk, singly or in family groups. They kneel and their restless children squirm about while the monk unreels a white thread to tie their wrists, sometimes linking people together and sometimes including himself in the union.

There is an inner sanctum, too, where a constant stream of worshippers squeeze in and out of a narrow door into a walled rectangle open to the night sky. Except for a narrow passage around the perimeter in which people kneel and step over each other, this space is filled by the stepped ruin of an old stupa. Its steps are lined with burning candles and sweet-scented flowers. A man hands out tin trays from a stack and the faithful fill them with offerings of coconuts, bananas, more candles and sheaves of pungent burning incense sticks, place the laden trays on the pavement and kneel to pray. A more complex religious ceremony starts with a kind of tall bamboo dice cup filled with wooden spills resembling swizzle sticks. The worshipper shakes this cup vigorously, then selects a spill at random. There is a number on it. He or she then draws a small folded piece of paper from the correspondingly numbered drawer of a miniature chest, and without unfolding it, puts the paper through the slot of a wooden letter box. That's it.

In a formerly French south-east Asian city, we of course ate well. At the Cote d'Azur on the riverfront we tucked into stir-fried seafood; on the rattan-shaded veranda of the Vendome I rejoiced in a thick, juicy filet steak exquisitely grilled 'seigneur'. There was decent wine by the pichet, too. Judith lost her nerve about sampling the more exotic local cuisine in a market. After her usual trick of trying out a cloche-shaped wicker lampshade on her head, she spotted a

writhing mass of tadpoles in a tank and a basket of ducks' eggs with one shell opened to display the foetus of the half-grown chick in the amniotic sac.

But we could not resist the barbecued river fish we discovered in one of the local shanty restaurants upstream. This dish is called Phan Pa and is served with a large platter heaped with strange coarse-chopped crunchy vegetables of various kinds, peanuts, and what might have been pork scratchings. One fish was enough for both of us and the meal cost £1.70. Across the river Thailand beckoned in the blackness with a display of fairy lights, including a Ferris wheel and a Blackpool tower. But next day we flew to north Vietnam.

Hanoi is less than an hour by air from Vientiane, and it's still in the tropics, but we flew from the lotus land of summer into the winter of the soul. It was grey. It drizzled. It was 13 degrees centigrade. There were Aeroflot aircraft on the tarmac. The female immigration officer wore a grey uniform with enormous gold-starred epaulets, a visored cap with an absurdly high brim, and a sour frown. Even at the poor exchange rate offered by the airport taxi stand, a hundred dollar bill made me a dong millionaire. There were big black cars, traffic lights and billboards. The paddy fields were dotted with white gravestones and the people labouring behind plodding bullocks wore quaint conical hats, but those on motorbikes wore suits or leather jackets or uniforms the colour of pea-green slime. Night fell as we arrived in the city centre. The airport taxi driver tried to take us to a hotel of his own choosing, and when told to stop wanted to decant us into the middle of the frantic traffic stream. When he was persuaded to pull into the kerb we were besieged by a flock of jabbering cyclo (bicycle rickshaw) drivers. Women hurried past in their conical wicker hats and men in domed olive drab pith helmets. Many wore white masks over the lower part of their faces as though there had been a nuclear disaster; sometimes only their eyes showed through the slit of a mummy's face-wrap. Bright lights flashed through the cold wet mist. It seemed a northern European city, yet everyone looked Chinese - a cross between Brussels and the nameless bedlam city of the film *Bladerunner*.

18. North Vietnam



To be frank we had thoroughly got the wind up even before we got there. The Vietnam edition of the usually reliable *Lonely Planet* guidebook series is paranoiac about theft, scams and general skulduggery. (Perhaps the publishers are smarting from an American product liability litigation; the editorial style seems to be directed at travellers who would have difficulty getting their bags off the conveyor belt unaided.) So we were easily daunted by the cold, brusque reception a visitor receives in Hanoi on a drizzly night in February. Laden with backpacks and searching for our bearings, we attracted touts like an open jam jar draws flies. The final one accosted us just as we spied the hotel we were looking for. He asked if we wanted a hotel. I said that the only help we needed was getting across the damned road. In rush hour Hanoi this isn't easy. The tout followed us across the street, and after we were safely in our room, tried to extract a commission from the hotel clerk.

Unlike India, which tends to have only sub-standard or super deluxe accommodation, Vietnam offers a good range of mid-price modern hotels with all the usual amenities. Called "mini-hotels", they are not only much better value, they also enjoy a superior location because the top-class international hotels are overgrown monstrosities confined to the fringes of the city. We chose the Trang An because it was in the old quarter and because the lower end of its price range, \$30 to \$50, seemed acceptable for the centre of a big city. But we

almost walked past it because it looked like a clothing shop. The old quarter of Hanoi comprises 36 streets, each historically dedicated to a particular craft. The Trang An is on Pho Hang Gai or "Silk Street", and its ground floor windows were full of gowns and shirts and plastered with sale signs. The lobby was given over to display counters, goods on shelves and salespeople. When we located the hotel reception desk on one side of the shop and asked the price of a double room, at first I thought the receptionist replied "fifty dollars", but it turned out to be fifteen. Whether this 50% discount off the bottom price was because the hotel was now a silk shop, or because of the extensive renovations which were underway elsewhere on the premises we never discovered. But for less than ten pounds a night we acquired a large room with Edwardian-style furniture, a modern bathroom with hot water issuing from both shower and basin taps, free toiletries, a telephone, colour television with CNN, a hair dryer and a buffet breakfast which included cold meats and cheese. True, at night the lobby was eerie when the clothing store finally shut up shop. All the counters and displays were swathed in white dust sheets, and once Judith said goodnight to a mannequin.

By grey daylight Hanoi remained intense. The streets are choked with traffic, mostly motorbikes, mopeds and bicycles, often transporting two or three people, or a family of five, or improbably long, wide or heavy loads of bamboo poles, hardboard, trussed poultry or a stallholder's complete inventory. The pavements are blocked with parked motorbikes and people squatting cooking, eating, washing, smoking long bamboo pipes or working at their craft. So one walks in the street trying to stay kerbside of the people coming the other way. The only way to cross the road is to wait for a thinning of the traffic stream, step out boldly and keep moving slowly forward. Miraculously, vehicles avoid you - as long as you don't stop. The craft streets of old Hanoi are still intact and, as you move about, the continual hooting of the traffic is punctuated by new sounds - metal bashing at the tinsmiths' street, sawing at the coffin-makers' street. Old trades like herbal medicine, funeral decorations, hemp and charcoal merchants have been infiltrated by modern wares - there is a street which appears to be entirely devoted to the manufacture and sale of motorbike saddles.

As property taxes are levied according to the width of frontage, the buildings of the old quarter, even newly constructed mini-hotels, are tall, narrow and deep. Open shops and narrow alleys give a glimpse of the crowded living quarters, but everyone is busy and cheerful; some people carry leafless branches budding with pink blossoms and on the balconies stand tubs with small trees bearing oranges, kumquats or sweet limes.

A decade ago the only career options for a young Vietnamese were to be a peasant farmer, a small stallholder, or to work for the government. In 1991 there was a shake-up of the ruling political old guard; in 1994 the USA withdrew its embargo, and since then there has been increasing foreign investment and gradual political and economic liberalisation. The Vietnamese are a vigorous and tenacious people. Over the past few decades they have seen off the French, the Americans and the Chinese. Now they are taking on capitalism. An entrepreneurial spirit is alive everywhere and the genie cannot be put back into

the bottle. Tourism is booming. Facilities are well-organised and efficient, and offer tours which are amazingly flexible, personal and of high quality. Many of the hole-in-the-wall cafes in Hanoi seem to have the same name: Sinh Cafe. These are actually franchised branches of the government-run tourist organisation of that name. This agency controls most of the tourist trade, but competitive independent operators thrive as well. Through Sinh Cafe we booked a three-day tour to Halong Bay. The itinerary: morning pick-up by tour bus at our hotel, a 160 kilometre journey to Halong City, a good lunch (six dishes) at a dockside restaurant, a five-hour cruise through the fantastic rocky configurations of Halong Bay (including a tour of some magnificent caverns), two nights' stay at a modern hotel on Cat Ba island (including two excellent dinners and breakfasts), a guided trek across the island with return to the hotel by motorboat, and on the final day, the return boat ride to the mainland, another splendid lunch and the bus back to Hanoi. Total cost: £ 20 per head.



Vietnam is a nation of small farmers and most of them, most of the time, grow rice. It is an activity of grinding toil. The mud is ploughed with yoked buffaloes, plants which have been sown in nursery beds are lifted and planted one by one in orderly ranks, perfectly aligned, and thereafter kept continually wet with water scoops wielded by one person bending over, or two people swinging the basket between them on cords. The farmers live in humble one-story dwellings, but in the country villages there are also new houses of three or four stories, once again attenuated like a Modigliani portrait.

They are built on earth raised only a meter or so above the level of the flooded paddy fields, and though usually isolated and standing like solitary towers, seem constructed in expectation that they will shortly be enclosed within a row of terraced houses. Both sides of the building are entirely bereft of windows and the grey concrete is left as bare as the day it was poured. Only the front is painted, the facade usually elaborately decorated with tile-roofed balconies, arches and sometimes a blank expanse of dark-coloured reflective glass extending the height of two or three storeys.

Halong Bay in winter is like the Costa Brava with the climate of Morecambe Bay. Our boat chugged through a calm sea in a monotone Chinese painting. The sun never penetrated the heavy clouds which hung just above the spectacular shapes of limestone islets, stacks and arches. Solitary sea eagles soared overhead. We passed fishing boats where families lived on the mooring and skiffs rowed by women standing in the stern and pushing, rather than pulling, the oars. Once we were boarded by entrepreneurial pirates: a motorised craft pulled alongside crewed by three generations of women. Grandmother held the tiller, while mother secured a warp to our moving boat, and a cheeky moppet of five or six clambered aboard to sell packaged snacks, including, yes, Pringles.

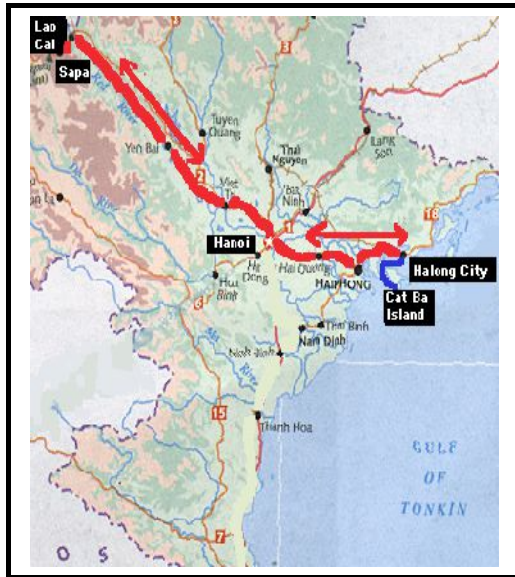
Rounding a rocky peninsula we beheld a bizarre sight. The harbour of Cat Ba village is filled with more than a hundred floating shacks built on moored rafts. Whole families live on these: on one we spied four toddlers and a barking dog; another boasted a satellite television disk. These floating homes are used by fishermen whose trawlers are moored together in strings in another part of the bay. For some it is just a convenient base; for others, though, it is their only home. Behind this ramshackle flotilla, through the gloaming rose the bright lights and towers of a row of garish mini-hotels. Tall and narrow, most are only one room wide. We drew a room on the top floor of the tallest of these - a six-storey walk-up.

Out of season, Cat Ba village is a forlorn and lonely place. For excitement the local lads are reduced to practising their krataw and football kicks with a shuttlecock. There are building works everywhere and the entire promenade has the impermanence of a hastily built movie set. Not surprisingly, because five years ago there was only one hotel, not thirty, in this fishing port. The large island of Cat Ba was one of the poorest areas in Vietnam, but much of the new investment has come from its former residents. These were of Chinese extraction, and after the Vietnamese repulsed the brief Chinese invasion of 1979, they were driven out. Many of them prospered in China and North America and are now fuelling the land boom in their former home village.

Our 12 kilometre trek across the island with a party of ten took us across four steep and slippery ridges. We arrived at a village where we tucked into a welcome noodle soup before returning round the island by motorboat. But the most memorable moment of the day occurred during our visit to an underground military hospital constructed during the "American War". Our scowling middle-aged guide at this attraction wore a uniform and spoke no English. But after gathering a coachload of us into one of the dim chambers he suddenly burst into a karaoke performance. His face wreathed in smiles, he sang a patriotic account, complete with pointing gestures, of how he and his colleagues had shot down attacking American planes. We were urged to clap our hands and chant "Ho Chi Minh" and "Viet Nam" along with him. My hands stayed in my pockets and my lips remained firmly clamped around clenched teeth.

We did not stay in Hanoi again but left by overnight train for Sapa, a mountain village about 250 kilometres north-west. This tour, organised by an independent company, involved a ten-hour train journey each way to and from Lao Cai on the Chinese border, a forty kilometre road transfer to Sapa and return, two nights' hotel accommodation and two days of guided treks - for £ 34 each. A youth escorted us to Hanoi railway station by taxi and saw us to the right sleeper carriage, which we boarded with two big folding cushions under our arms, thoughtfully provided to ease tender western spines: the metal sleeping platforms are covered only with a thin mat. We shared our four-berth compartment with a brash young policeman or soldier in a sickly green uniform and his glum and clinging wife. We had to evict this pair from our lower berths,

and he squatted above raining down peanut shells until, in my smartest military manner, I ordered him to desist.



As it turned out, we had a guide each on our treks as there were only the two of us on this tour, and our man was training a new recruit. He met us at the Lao Cai railway station where we joined a minibus with other travellers. Heading up a valley towards the mountain range which harbours Sapa, we saw China for the first time. Just across the river from the shanties on the outskirts of Lao Cai rises an incongruous cluster of large, modern concrete buildings in bright pastel colours - hotels or offices - behind a ceremonial welcoming arch composed of two concrete ellipses on edge and leaning tipsily together. It looks like the lurid entrance to a cheesy amusement park.

At mid-morning on a day in February Sapa was wrapped in a grey flannel mist and was dripping wet. It lies at about 2,000 metres, surrounded by higher mountains, and on a sunny day in late spring or summer must be very beautiful. But from December to June the morning fog sinks low into the valleys and you can't see further than the next guest house. The cloud rises gradually during the day; though the sun is never seen there is a pale, cold glow and you can see across the valley, its sides sculpted into layers of rice paddies. It was still too cold in the mountains to begin the rice cultivation cycle, so the terraces glistening with water held only the stubbled straw of last year's crop. Yet, the occasional pink blossom on a bare branch reminded us that spring would not be denied. At dusk, as the neon lights switch on in the empty karaoke bars of Sapa, the cloud ceiling descends to clasp the village in its clammy embrace again.

The Hmong tribal people farm these valleys and climb their steep trails to bring their produce to market. They are tiny stunted people. One rarely sees the men, who spend most of the winter drinking rice wine, but the paths are alive with plodding women bent under baskets and scampering barefoot children. These are the "Black Hmong" and wear coarse indigo fabrics. (There are also the Red, Green and Flower Hmong tribes, which dress appropriately). The girls and women looming out of the mist wore indigo pillbox hats, an indigo tunic or apron over what appeared to be indigo shorts or culottes. Their knees are always bare, though they wear leggings up to their calves. The dreary garb is relieved by intricate embroidered designs. At first we thought all these women and children were turning blue with the raw cold. Their hands were blue, their faces were blue, their exposed knees were blue. They cultivate indigo plants to dye their cloth, but the process they use is not colour fast.

We squelched, slithered and slid down steep paths lathered with mud. Some ragged six-year-old entrepreneurs had taken up a position where our path left the roadside, and sold us sharpened bamboo walking sticks for 1,000 dong (ten pence) - one of the most sensible investments I have ever made. The valley ran with water everywhere. and we were never out of earshot of the liquid gurgle, the creaking swivel and then the chunky thud of a primitive water-powered milling machine. Its scoop fills with water, then releases a stout boom to hammer down on a hollowed stone filled with grain. The Hmong families keep pot-bellied black pigs - very fashionable in the West - and live with them in flimsy wooden shacks with earth floors. There is no chimney, but a wood fire is kept alight in a hole in the ground all day, and people huddle around it to cook and keep warm. The smoke escapes, eventually, through holes in the wooden roofs.

On our second day-walk we visited a different tribe, the Tay. They keep ducks for their eggs and are much more sophisticated; the women wear Chinese street clothes, even suit jackets, though they sport a plaid scarf folded like a turban on their heads. Before setting off our guide took us to the market where we bought packets of noodles and fresh vegetables: green beans, spring onions, tomatoes, bean sprouts, and a green resembling spinach. We carried these vegetables, which had just come up from the fields, back down the mountain again. At lunchtime we chopped and cooked a vegetable stir fry in a Tay kitchen over an open fire. Each vegetable was fried individually, then piled onto plates. Despite this delay, the dish was still warm. We set to with chopsticks. The vegetables were so crisp and fresh that it was a truly memorable meal.

We took our other meals in a cosy little family restaurant, the Mimosa, which we discovered off the main street. We sampled eel and wild boar dishes, and particularly savoured the Sapa grape wine - like a slightly sweet vermouth - and rice wine "whisky", which tastes (and acts) like grappa. This liquor we enjoyed after dinner, hunched over the small charcoal brazier with the family.

The train used up all of the next day to crawl back down the Red River valley to Hanoi. Buds were in bloom, rice was being planted out in the terraces, bamboo rafts with little huts on them floated lazily in the sun as in Huck Finn's era, and we were able to peel off several layers of clothing. In Hanoi we had to squeeze in dinner whilst finding out how to get from Terminal A - which serves northern routes - to terminal B - where trains depart for the south. It turned out that they sit back-to-back across the tracks, but one has to walk half a kilometre around them to get from one terminal to the other. Along the way we had one of our most satisfactorily ethnic meals. At a pavement restaurant we perched on plastic stools to eat plates of tasty noodles with chicken and knocked back a couple of mugs filled with watery draft beer delivered from a tin tank via a plastic hose. Total cost for two: 65p. "Bia Hoi" (draft beer) is one of the few vital Vietnamese phrases we can speak. The others are "thit cho" (dog meat) so that we can avoid it, and "Khong kmon" (no, thank you) which you need to say every few minutes to touts on the street. Strangely, this invariably causes them to laugh. As Vietnamese is a tonal language, perhaps what we're really saying is "I have gladioli growing between my toes".

19: South Vietnam.



North and South Vietnam are divided not only by culture and history but also by climate. About midway down the long seaboard-clinging crescent of Vietnam a low range of mountains running east-west cuts the country in two. Bach Ma, an old French hill station, now a national park, marks the divide. Though not particularly high at 1200 metres, the mountains rise abruptly and curtain off the warm winds of the south. North of this line it is always cooler and wetter. Hue, a city of 250,000 population and a historic cultural centre is still 70 kilometres on the wrong side of the Hai Van pass and is subject to frequent sudden rainstorms. We were lucky and soon forgot the gloomy skies of Hanoi as we emerged blinking into the sunshine and warm airs of Hue railway station. The journey had taken 15 hours and though the views of green hills and winding rivers were tantalising the carriage windows were sealed and grubby. We resolved henceforth to make long Vietnamese journeys by air.

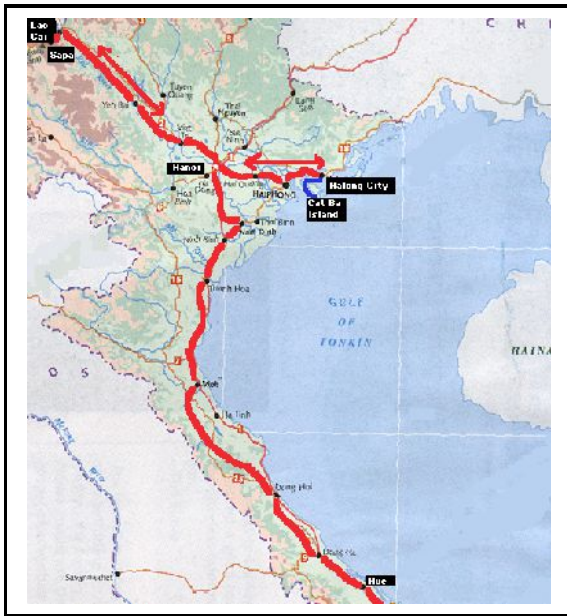
Its moated citadel is Hue's chief attraction and an important national symbol. The Viet Cong raised their flag here in 1969 when they captured the city during the Tet offensive. They held on to it for 25 days and took the opportunity to murder about 3,000 civilians - foreigners, monks, priests, intellectuals and suspected South Vietnamese sympathisers - before they were prised out of the old fortifications again by the Americans. The bloody struggle left around 5,000 combatants dead, mostly Viet Cong.

During this battle and an earlier uprising against the French in 1885 much of the old fortified city was devastated and is now open space. The Forbidden Purple City, a palace compound which only the emperor, his concubines and eunuch servants were allowed to enter, was totally destroyed in the Tet offensive. The remaining buildings, though of 19th Century origin, are part of a much older, strongly Chinese-influenced feudal system. Steep-roofed pavilions with folding doors extending across the whole wide front are decorated in flaming red and gold enamels. They appear to have been erected in a spacious park. The true history of large scale demolition is betrayed only by the impact scars of bullets and rockets on the massive exterior walls of the citadel.

Hue cuisine is particularly renowned, so we were delighted when a French couple in Cat Ba passed on the addresses of two restaurants which they praised highly. When the first turned out to be a five-star hotel featuring a cabaret we abjured it as an unaccountable aberration by French *bon viveurs*. The second restaurant, situated in a private villa in the old city quarter, was altogether more promising, and we scouted it during a stroll. The ground floor opened on two sides onto a pleasant garden, where we found the gracious lady owner in her Chinese sheath and made a booking for dinner. When we returned by cyclo (bicycle rickshaw) that evening our faces fell. The quiet lane was blocked by three tour buses and, apart from the table for two reserved for us, the villa was filled with coach parties gathered at long tables.

There is a rule in catering: the more attention given to the quality of presentation, the less is devoted to the quality of the food. The Tinh Gia Vien restaurant was a supreme example of this maxim. Service was performed by exquisite tiny girls wearing tight-fitting silk gowns in dark colours over flowing white trousers. Their black hair hung in long dark plaits or was elegantly coiled. Madame herself was resplendent in glittering gold embroidery. There was a set menu card, or rather six of them, with prices ranging from £6 to £10 - wildly extravagant by local standards. All had similar lists of ten or more dishes with uninformative names such as "Peacock Surprise", so it was quite impossible to make a reasoned choice. We shuffled through these cards and finally selected one menu at random. The dishes arrived in sumptuous procession, in the colourful shapes of birds, fish, serpents - even a phoenix ingeniously contrived with pieces of fruit sculpted and teased into wondrous arrangements, with morsels of meat and fish attached with toothpicks. The taste of these dazzling creations ranged from average to bland to indistinguishable. In one dish the body of an exotic bird was formed of a peeled, sliced pineapple and once we had disposed of its tasteless plumage we attacked the refreshing fruit with relief. It was half-demolished when one of the pretty waitresses scurried up, clapped her hands to her cheeks and wailed that we were not supposed to eat that part of the presentation. She promptly whisked our plates away. Whether the pineapple corpse had already been served up to several previous diners and was needed for further use, we don't know. The dénouement arrived with the grilled prawns artfully arranged in the shape of a starfish. They had the taste and texture of soggy loo paper. We left them and when Madame appeared at our table I told her the prawns were either stale or had been frozen. She protested that she had

bought them herself in the market that morning. I don't know whether she tried one in the kitchen, but a few moments later she sent another dish to our table in recompense: small round fish which shimmered as though they had been dipped in quicksilver. A very special local delicacy, we were informed. They were very bony and without much taste.



The evening was, as they say, “a unique dining experience”, from which we drew the instructive moral: not all Frenchmen know about food. As I remarked to Judith, when Madame started the restaurant perhaps twenty years ago she probably served good food and went to the market each morning, but she had been ruined by success with coach parties and had doubtless not personally visited the market in years. Perhaps I was wrong, or maybe our experience had pricked her conscience, for as we wandered through the market next morning, there she was with a big “hello” and a basket on her arm.

The truly good food, as always, we found in the humblest cafes. The local speciality, Ban Khoai, is a kind of crisp, folded pancake filled with shredded fresh vegetables and beef. A delicious, satisfying snack which costs about 25p. Judith also experimented with Che Xanh Chia, which turned out to be an iced drink made from white and red beans cooked until soft, in a sweet, coconut-flavoured liquid.

Another cultural attraction of Hue are the tombs erected by former monarchs along the Perfume River. We joined an all-day boat excursion which called at six of these sites. The price included a splendid fresh vegetable noodle lunch prepared on board. Entrance to some of the sites was free; for others there was a reasonable charge, and once we had to negotiate a fee to ride pillion on motorbikes a couple of kilometres on bumpy dirt roads to reach the site. These Royal Tombs, scattered along 15 kilometres of the Perfume River, are quite modern, dating only from the 19th and 20th century Nguyen Dynasty. Each complex is different in style, all are perfectly preserved and spread over several acres of landscaped gardens, pools and lakes. Though absolutely lavish and self-indulgent these memorials are exquisitely peaceful and soothing to the soul, which I suppose was the whole idea. Nature is tamed and contrived. Buildings and landscape combine in a harmonious whole. Obviously the work of a sensitive human. Which makes it difficult for a Westerner to comprehend the other brutal customs of these ruling classes so close to our own age. These palatial tombs do not contain the bodies of the despots who conceived them. For fear of grave robbers the emperors were buried in secret locations - and the 200

servants who attended the burial of the sensitive, harmonious Tu Doc were beheaded so they could not betray the whereabouts of his corpse.

We travelled on a long narrow local motorboat, shabbily constructed but decorated with a gilded dragon's head on the prow. It was crewed by three women: the mother who helmed, her fifteen-year-old daughter who wielded the pole that brought us into landings, and another nattily dressed young woman who boarded the boat with an armful of paintings for sale. The family lived on the boat; the windowless aft cabin over the engine was furnished with mats, trunks, a music station and a fluorescent light tube, and during quiet moments the young girl did her homework on the floor. Twenty passengers paid £1.75 each to their hotels for this journey, which after deducting the cost of commissions, the taxi, diesel fuel and food, could not have netted the family much income.

Another indication of the general poverty - or lack of investment capital - in Vietnam is the manner of dredging the Perfume River. All through the day we passed flotillas of long, slender pirogues heaped with mud. Three men sat amidships turning a large spool to wind in a rope attached to a long-handled wooden shovel manipulated by a fourth man. The boats sat so low in the water that the wake from passing craft spilled over the gunwales, and a fifth chap was employed baling out with a wicker basket.

Hoi An is 100 kilometres south of Hue, on the right side of the weather barrier. Crossing the Hai Van pass by bus, a magnificent vista opened up: miles of white sandy beach sheltered by steep green forested hills. This is China Beach, once a rest and recreation centre for the American army. It is sunnier and hotter and culture changes, too. In Da Nang the slim young girls on bicycles wear the national dress: the flowing cloak and flared trousers of the Au Dai. Sometimes they are all in white and look as unreal as a laundry detergent commercial. Many of the women on bicycles, scooters and motorcycles wear elbow-length white evening gloves and beneath their conical hats or straw bonnets their faces are masked. This is not just to guard against traffic fumes, but also against the sun, because a light-coloured skin is fashionable.

The ancient fishing village of Hoi An was untouched by the French and American wars and is as picturesque as a film set. Its only flaw, in fact, was a film set, a group of plywood huts that was being erected on the harbour front. An Australian director was re-shooting "The Quiet American", starring Michael Caine, and naturally felt obliged to improve on natural perfection. The low stucco and wood buildings now house charming shops, cafes and restaurants with outdoor terraces. Scattered here and there are the original trading houses of Chinese merchants, two and three hundred years old. They have large airy rooms constructed of dark timbers, alcoves devoted to ancestors' shrines and balconied courtyards open to the skies. Oriental lanterns hang from overhead beams and the furnishings are lacquered Chinese antiques. Every surface is exquisitely carved and decorated: in one building the jackwood pillars were inlaid with mother-of-pearl ideograms, which only upon close inspection revealed a design of water birds. Two of the old traders' houses we toured are

still inhabited - by the fifth and eighth generations of the families who built them. They remain privately owned, but obviously the government has exerted great pressure to extract commercial benefit from these national treasures. They are open for tours for long hours every day, whole rooms are devoted to embroidery workshops or the sale of craftwork, and the members of the family are employed as guides. There is precious little time or space left over for them to enjoy the privileges of ownership.

On our first night we stayed in a merchant's house which had been converted into a hotel, in a huge dark-panelled room with an ornate four-poster bed and shuttered windows opening onto a balcony over a quiet street. The room smelled of cedar and camphor. However, a tour group had block-booked this sanctum and so we decamped the next day to a simpler but delightful waterfront hotel where the balcony overlooked the river. The management fetched us by motorbike - first our bags, then ourselves, riding pillion.

We devoted one morning to a visit by tour bus to My Son, the ruins of the Cham kingdom, occupied from the 4th to the 13th century, longer than any other historic monument in Southeast Asia. In a striking setting, completely encircled by a range of verdant mountains, traces of 68 red-brick structures are scattered over a wide area. Only vestiges survive: stunted towers, dark cells and fragments of carving covered with moss, ferns and vibrant blue flowers. It looks like graceful natural decay, but My Son has a haunted atmosphere. Because the ruins are ringed by mountains the Viet Cong used them as a base during the "American War" and they were heavily bombed until a French archaeologist persuaded President Nixon to call a halt. Strange hollows are overgrown bomb craters and the inscribed tombstone steles show the impact of bullets.



Another renowned feature of Hoi An is its tailoring. There are streets full of fabric shops and smiling female touts approach you at every turn. We had the address of a particularly efficient lady and spent part of each day choosing fabrics, designing clothing, fitting and re-fitting. In the end we purchased several tailor-made outfits: three silks shirts for me, a pair of cotton cargo trousers for each of us, and for Judith a pair of cotton shorts and a four-piece suit - blouse, jacket, skirt and trousers - in fuschia-coloured Thai shot silk. All well-tailored and delivered the same day. Total outlay: £ 76. If you're planning to restock your wardrobe it must be worth the price of a return air ticket to Hoi An.

Beneath the tourist economy there are still traces of the past. Elderly women show black teeth when they smile, not from chewing betel nut, but because of a custom, no longer trendy, of staining the teeth to achieve the beauty of a watermelon - rosy cheeks and black pips. And as night falls the smell of incense wafts through the air as shopkeepers and householders light sticks and set little paper packets alight in the gutters.

We ate traditional fare, too, favouring the waterfront thatched roof restaurants. There are three special dishes and we sampled all of them for lunch: white rose (crab meat parcels like dim sum), banh bao (crisp, fried wonton stuffed with pork meat), and cau lau (a special noodle soup or stew with pork and vegetables). Another favourite was a green river creeper we had seen people wading in the water to harvest. Delicious fried with garlic. For dinners we frequented the Café des Amis, a simple place with tables on the waterfront promenade offering a four-course set menu which changes daily and drinkable French wine at a reasonable price. This is where we met Tottenham Man. We don't know his real name, but you can't miss him. He's straight out of that "Private Eye" cartoon series about estuarine English lager louts. He is very large, mid-30s, with a receding hairline and a black ponytail, speaks pure East End - including Cockney rhyming slang - and supports Tottenham Hotspur. However he has a world view. He lives and works in Thailand, and has an oriental wife whom he did not speak to for ten minutes after they sat down at the next table. I ventured a facetious remark about being careful not to tip his chair back into the pavement display of china from the shop behind him, which he dismissed with a grunt. It was only when the waiter addressed his wife in Vietnamese that he found tongue: "She's Thai," he bellowed. "Just because she's got a yellow face doesn't mean she's Vietnamese". After that opener, in the non-stop manner of a London cab driver he disgorged advice about football and the perils of travel in Vietnam. We discovered that the beach at Nha Trang, our next destination, would be littered with condoms and hypodermic syringes and patrolled by footpads who would snatch our beach bag and roar off on a motorbike (motopads?). Our further destination, Saigon, would be even worse. Forty per cent of its residents are drug addicts who have developed techniques for slashing open your daypack to empty its contents. If you wear jewellery, they will take it at knifepoint, and perhaps your finger as well. They infest the moribund construction site of a huge shopping plaza, which borders the backpackers' ghetto.

We flew to Nha Trang the next day, our hearts in our mouths. We found a dozy seaside resort of the very early Costa Brava style. There is a fine palm-fringed beach of coarse sand, unencumbered, as far as we could see, by condoms or syringes. Though there was an incessant stream of paperback book peddlers - all with the same inventory of guidebooks and best-sellers which appeared to have been laser-printed - we encountered no thieves, mounted or otherwise. We lazed on sunloungers, ate excellent clam and prawn and oyster fry-ups, and for £3.30 per head took an all-day boat tour which called on several of the misty islands on the horizon. We snorkeled and saw a Moorish Idol (the yellow and black one with the dorsal fin extending like a plume over its tail), took a spin, literally, in a female-powered coracle at a fishing village, visited a government-

owned beach where the loyal cadres are treated to beer and paragliding, and were served a splendid ten-course lunch cooked and served on board. Our most degenerate impression of Nha Trang was the immediate post-prandial hour, as we drank in the sun, suspended by inner tubes in the South China Sea, our toes hooked around a floating cradle in which a chap sat constantly replenishing our glasses from a crate of Mulberry wine.

20. Cambodia



Like a smooth stone skipping over a flat sea, in five days we visited five countries - Vietnam, Cambodia, Thailand, Malaysia and Indonesia. On Monday morning we were piled into a cyclo pedalling the one kilometre from our beachside hotel to the Nha Trang airport (the Americans built their airfields handy to their military bases). On Friday morning we were sunning ourselves on the stern deck of a hydrofoil as it powered across the Straits of Malacca between Penang and Medan. Along the way we stopped in Ho Chi Minh City (Saigon) and Siem Reap, Cambodia. (Those readers who are still awake and were provided with a copy of our itinerary will recognise that there has been a change of route. After taking a closer look at the map of Indochina, we decided it was foolish - monumentally foolish - to fly over Angkor Wat without visiting it).

I was looking for the romantic Saigon of boulevard cafes and French colonial architecture, but what I found was another busy Eastern city. Compared to Hanoi, Ho Chi Minh City has wider streets and broader pavements, more cars and less two-wheeled traffic, and fewer peasants bearing loads on swinging yokes, and so it's somewhat easier to get about on foot. We saw no sign of the legions of drug-crazed cutpurses who, according to Tottenham Man, our Hoi An informant, populate District One near the city centre. However, we followed his advice to head for the backpackers' ghetto near the only Sinh Cafe. For an

overnight stop this suited us fine: an abundance of simple cafes serving shakes, beer and wholesome local dishes, internet facilities and modest hotels.

Our sightseeing was limited to the Reunification Palace. This is a three-storey 1960s building set in a large central park. It was constructed by South Vietnam president Ngo Dinh Diem to replace the French colonial governor's palace which he (Ngo) was bombed out of by his own air force in 1962. He included a basement bomb shelter in the plans for its replacement, but never took up residence, because his army troops had a better aim and murdered him the following year. His various successors had a short tenure of lease because in 1975 the palace was occupied by victorious Viet Cong troops. It is interesting only because it has been left exactly as it was then and is a perfectly preserved relic of opulent mid-1960s design. The huge meeting rooms and entertainment suites present a decor which is both sumptuous and cheesy: extravagant Chinese-style antiques incongruously set in surroundings of pale wood, grand flared lighting fixtures, coloured marble, enormous conference tables shaped like oval doughnuts, and fat sofas and armchairs in bright coloured leather. The basement is given over to bunkers for telecommunications centres and a war room with large maps on the wall showing the disposition of the armies in 1975 and containing an elaborate bed for the president to sleep in when the shells were falling. On the roof, convenient for a quickie departure, is a cocktail lounge bar and a helipad. It is a powerful symbol of the excesses which a corrupt regime is capable of when fuelled with a limitless supply of US dollars. Of course the Communists then go ahead and spoil the effect by showing a ludicrous propaganda film. We both fell asleep, but enjoyed the air conditioning.

Cambodia has an ingenious on-arrival visa system. Entering the dinky 1950s-style Siem Reap airport terminal, you encounter a desk with seven small uniformed men sitting behind it in a row. You hand your passport, a spare passport photograph and some dollars to Grumpy at one end, he waves you towards the opposite end of the desk and passes your papers to Sleepy, who shuffles them and passes them on to his colleagues, who each do what they have to do, until your passport, properly stamped, is handed on to Happy, who gives it to you, thus adding useful foreign exchange to the Cambodia economy, while providing jobs for seven men.

The standard taxi fare to town is \$5, but I was approached by a uniformed customs officer who procured us a car for \$1. In the end we didn't even pay that, because we struck a satisfactory deal with the driver for three days car hire, which of course was the point of the "loss leader" exercise. Unless you want to perch on the pillion of a motorbike, without a helmet - and many people do - a car and driver is essential to visit Angkor. The nearest temples are about six kilometres outside of Siem Reap; the whole site covers 200 square kilometres and includes 40 accessible structures. I am not going to attempt to portray this marvel except to say that it should not be missed and no photograph or film can convey to you how vast it is. There is a very sensible and reasonably priced arrangement for a three-day entrance pass which allows you to go anywhere you like as often as you like.

The temples date from the 7th to the 15th century and though severely vandalised, retain much of their majesty, with hundreds of metres of finely chiselled decorative friezes, arches, halls, staircases, sculptures and sunken pools. Angkor Wat is merely one of these, but the largest and grandest. It is laid out on several levels with temples, long galleries and five soaring towers. Its perimeter walls measure 5.5 kilometres, the bridge which crosses the encircling outer moat is 200 metres long, and beyond the first galleried terrace the causeway to the main buildings carries on another 350 metres.



We visited 15 other sites as well, and each was different in character. Some are romantic ruins, untouched since they were first discovered, where the crumbling walls are gripped by the thick roots of huge strangler figs. One was a square island guarded by stone elephants on each corner of each tier, in the midst of a paddy fields which had once been a lake, and from the top you could imagine its original imperial isolation. There was also a temple structure encircled by stone snakes in the midst of a large walled pond, now dry, once fed by a cluster of four surrounding ponds. Banteay Srei was the most remote site we visited. It was an hour's drive along roads which were just being surfaced, and had been off limits until the death of Pol Pot and the capture of his key generals in 1998, the subsequent defection of masses of Khmer

Rouge and the surrender of the chief executioner just two years ago.

We were dazzled and delighted by it all. I was particularly struck by two motifs often repeated throughout Angkor. One was the balustrades erected on several bridges in the shape of a monstrous serpent, reminiscent of the Mekong river Naga so feared in Laos. On one side of the bridge it is held as in a tug-of-war by a row of placid gods, and on the other by snarling demons. The other splendid feature was the big stone faces which the eye suddenly discovers looming out of the jumbled ruins of a tower. The face has the blunted nose and thick lips of a Mayan god, bears a faint Mona Lisa smile, and when you once notice it you perceive it everywhere, appearing like the Cheshire Cat.

As an extra bonus, Siem Reap is a sleepy provincial version of the French Colonial pavement cafe lifestyle I had been looking for in Saigon. The outskirts have been overbuilt with lavish hotels, but we found a traditional dilapidated tropical hotel in the centre of town, hard by the market, the cafes and restaurants. The “Only One” bar is so called because it was the only bar in town when it opened in 1995; now there are dozens. With a French “patron” and menu and a pavement terrace under a thatched roof it is the perfect colonial-style cafe. We had a delicious pork brochette, real pommes frites, ratatouille with spicy eastern flavours, an omelette, creme caramel, and even a kir.

One of the pleasures of visiting Angkor is the relative absence of touts. Only the families of the police guards are permitted to solicit tourists; bizarrely, one is frequently approached by uniformed policemen offering a card case containing a brass badge inscribed “National Police”. More unnerving is the common sight of amputees and the blind, mostly youngish men, but also women. Some are beggars, but groups of others play traditional musical instruments at the sites, or participate in handicraft workshop programmes. Cambodia is still littered with unexploded ordnance and tourists are warned not to stray from designated paths.

It was an easy hop, skip and a jump from sleepy Siem Reap airport to Bangkok (where, unless my eyes deceived me, there is a narrow golf course extending between the runways) and on to Penang off the coast of the peninsula of Malaysia. We took a taxi to Georgetown, a thoroughly modern eastern city, where we nevertheless were able to doss down in the Cathay Hotel, another rambling wreck of a classic Colonial hotel. It had a huge high-ceilinged reception area, two impressive marble staircases, hallways as wide as a two-lane highway, wooden floors, double doors to our large room with worn art deco furniture and a ceiling fan. This establishment may be seen in the recent film, *Beyond Rangoon*, where it stood in for an atmospheric hotel in that city. We opened the wooden shutters to let in the sultry night air, and with it came the blast of the disco across the road that continued until the cocks started crowing.

21: Indonesia



We checked out of the slumbering Hotel Cathay early to catch the 8:30 ferry across the Straits of Malacca to Medan. It was a hassle to secure tickets and it was 8:40 before we got to the head of the queue in the emigration hall. We hurried onto the docks where there were no signs of any kind, and prospective passengers seemed to go off in all directions. The solution to the riddle was that there is not one ferry to Medan, but several hydrofoils, and they seem to leave when they are disposed to. Moreover they do not go to Medan but dock at a harbour 30 kilometres distant, from which you proceed by bus. It was 10:30 before we slipped our mooring and roared past the monument commemorating Queen Victoria's Jubilee and out into the blue horizon stretching beneath the immense bridge joining the island of Penang to Malaysia. It was a five-hour journey, which meant that an overnight stay in Medan, Indonesia's third largest city, was probably unavoidable.

We found a place to squat against a bulkhead on the aft deck where we basked in the sun until a sudden squall drenched us to the skin, the first rain we had felt since that day in the wildlife preserve in Periyar, Kerala, more than three months ago. We retired into the passenger lounge, where I had to strip off my shirt and trousers, but in another half-hour we were topside again, drying out in the sun. As one who played a part in inflicting Pot Noodle on the British public, I

got my comeuppance on this journey, as the only food available was Pom Mei, an identical product.

As we arrived in Indonesia there were insurrections in four different areas. People were rioting, burning down markets and severing the heads of their neighbours: the fundamentalist Muslims of Aceh in northern Sumatra, the native Dayaks eradicating the Madurese in the Borneo province of Kalimantan, Muslims again in the Malaccas (Spice Islands) and rebels against Javanese imperialism in Timor. These outbursts are the eruption of long-simmering discontent with the historic Java-centric policies of the Djakarta government, such as the resettlement of two million people from the overpopulated island of Madura to Kalimantan, the largest forced migration in history. Protestors were on the streets in Djakarta, too, the government was unstable and, happily for us, the rupiah was sinking like a stone. On arrival, at an exchange rate of 9,600 to the dollar, a couple of travellers' cheques made us millionaires again. When we left Indonesia two weeks later, the rate was 10,700 to the dollar.

We hit the Sumatra backpacker trail. Our room at the hotel we found near the Sugar Café was basic by Vietnamese standards, but almost stylish compared to India. For less than £2, a nasi goreng breakfast (fried rice and vegetables with an egg on top) was included. So was the noise of aircraft taking off just over the roof, replaced in the hours before sunrise by the muezzin chanting from the big mosque across the street. Next, onwards five hours by bus from Medan to Danau Toba, Southeast Asia's largest freshwater lake and at 525 metres, possibly its deepest as well. It is a glittering jewel set in the green basin of a huge volcano. There is a large mountainous island in the middle of the lake: Samosir is about forty kilometres long by fifteen wide, and its main village, Tuk Tuk, attracts young backpackers like a lodestone. The scenery is magnificent and there is a splendid choice of attractive lakeside hotels in all price ranges. They have their own docks where the ferry calls, and we stayed at the first port of call.

To be perfectly honest, though its atmosphere is idyllic, there's not a great deal to do on Samosir. That doesn't trouble the young backpackers, who do what they do everywhere: they talk endlessly; they read best-sellers; they listen to their headphones; they drink cokes and eat stodgy pancakes covered in chocolate and chopped nuts; they are chatted up local lads wearing pigtailed and tattoos who pluck guitars and are selling tours or other kinds of trips. We walked through the rice paddies and villages; we swam; and even played badminton and, when the afternoon rain poured down, billiards. Our lakeside bungalow was built on the local Batak style. It had three sleeping platforms at various levels under a sharply sloping peaked roof. The entrance door and much of the interior was only five feet high, which meant that I occasionally knocked myself senseless and departed Tuk Tuk on the ferry brown and relaxed, but with a scarred head. (I was also hit one night by a car bearing a crowd of Indonesian juvenile delinquents hesitantly down a dark lane. It had only one working headlight so I thought it was a motorcycle, and I suppose the driver thought my torch was a firefly. Anyway, it bruised the back of my hand, causing its wing mirror to fall off - which says more about the state of Indonesian road vehicles than it does about my durability.)

Next stop, Bukit Lawang - which required an all day bus journey back through Medan and 78 kilometres further north. The village is a row of shacks and tourist accommodation straggling along the rapids of the fast-flowing Sungai Boharok River beyond the rubber plantations in the mountainous terrain and thick jungle of the Gunung Lawser National Park. We stayed in a hotel with a restaurant extending over the river; at one corner was a slide, which you could mount and plunge down 15 feet into the water. But the key attraction here is the orang utan. There is an illegal trade in these animals; a baby orang utan can fetch



\$40,000 in Singapore. So, many are captured by villagers. The animals forget how to survive in the jungle; those born in captivity never learn. In 1973 a rehabilitation centre was established for the orang utans in Bukit Lawang. When they are brought here the animals are usually sick. Apes in the wild commonly suffer illnesses such as coughs and diarrhoea. But these animals have often contracted human diseases such as tuberculosis and hepatitis B. They are kept in cages for several years while

they are treated and gradually reintroduced to the jungle. Those which have been born in captivity have to be taught how to climb trees, build nests and forage. So far the centre has handled 221 orang utan. Forty-nine have died. Two have been sent to zoos, though because of subsequent poor treatment this policy has now been rescinded. One hundred and forty-seven have been released to the wild; the most successful of these resettlements are the 27 which have been put into enclosed boxes and transported deep into the jungle so they cannot find their way back. Nine are presently in cages; two of these have Downs syndrome and so can never be released. Fourteen are in a semi-wild transition period; they stay nearby and return from time to time, and it is these which the tourist can expect to see in the neighbouring jungle.

A feeding station is provided for these animals; twice daily bananas and milk are brought to a wooden platform. It is a monotonous diet and deliberately so. The idea is that the animals should be encouraged to forage for the fruit they prefer: figs and durians. Periodically the feeding stations are moved to a new site because the apes swinging down from the trees have destroyed the jungle canopy. When we arrived, as there was plenty of fruit in the jungle, no orang utan had been sighted at the feeding station for three weeks. So, we went looking for them on a guided jungle trek. We were hauled across the river in a dugout by a pulley on a rope. We scrambled up and down paths over the roots of mango trees, rubber trees and rattan. We had a jolly good lunch of nasi goreng carried in a banana leaf. We saw long-tailed macaques, Thompson monkeys and white-

handed gibbons. But we saw no orang utans. The next day we tried our luck at the feeding station, which had just been moved to a fresh location. The orang utans would have to find it, so we did not have much hope.

It's amazing how few people can sit still and silent for even a couple of minutes. We had been there half an hour and the chatter from twenty people sitting on planks sounded like a garden party just before the champagne runs out. Then, over the hubbub, a guide spoke out, "One is coming". The audience went quiet. There was the sound of branches creaking, and suddenly a burly red shaggy lump appeared, lowering itself down on vines. It moved very laboriously, and when it stood on the platform we could see why. It was a pregnant female. She took bananas from the hands of the guides, drank milk from a cup, stood and stretched and scratched like an expectant mother getting out of bed. Then she lumbered up into the vines again, swung slowly from tree to tree, and just before disappearing, launched a huge disdainful crap which fell to earth a metre from where I stood.

Moments later a second female arrived. Landing on the platform, she seemed to come apart. An infant male separated from her back to play on the platform. He was two years old, and will stay with his mother until he is five. His mother will not conceive again until then. Females breed at seven years of age and live thirty or forty years. Young orang utans are social animals, but after maturity they are solitary. Because they breed so infrequently and because there is a forty per cent infant mortality rate, most mothers leave only two offspring. The orang utan population is estimated by counting the animals' tree nests, which they build afresh every night, but as they sometimes build more than one, the figures are only rough. There are thought to be about 5,000 in Sumatra; there are more, of a different species, in Borneo.

That afternoon we returned to the feeding station and saw yet another female. We were warned that these animals have very long arms, which she promptly demonstrated by leaning down from a tree and snatching a tourist's camera, which was only retrieved by a heroic young man who wrenched it out of her grasp. We also saw a heavy young male (they weigh between fifty and eighty kilograms) attempting to climb a sapling. He was still learning, and crashed haplessly to earth several times.

While we were watching the show the heavens opened and as we scampered down from the mountain the path turned into a mudslide and then a stream. Down by the river we stripped off and waited on a covered verandah for the deluge to stop. An hour went by, the afternoon waned, and still it poured. Eventually, the ferry man signalled that he wanted to go home and so we put on our half-dry shirts and trudged out into the downpour again, sat in a canoe sloshing with water and marched a brisk kilometre or so back to the hotel, teeth chattering in the downpour

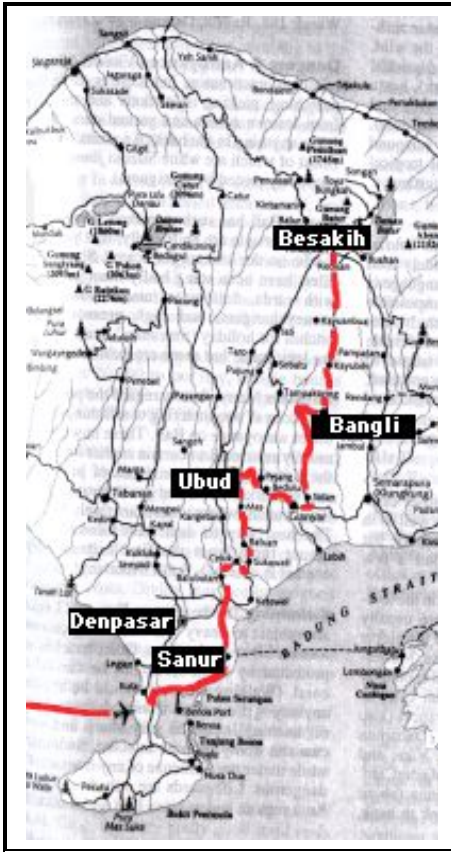
Our boots were still wet and smelled for days after we got to sunny Bali at the other, eastern, end of Indonesia. With a transfer at Djakarta airport, it took most of the next day to get to Denpasar. Kuta beach is over-run with rampaging

lager-fuelled Australian youth, Nusa Dua beach is manicured and expensive, and so we headed for Sanur, a sedate and middle-aged resort, and established ourselves in the Hotel Kesumasari, a delightful bungalow complex with a swimming pool a short walk from the five-kilometre long beach. Yes, there is a Dunkin' Donuts outlet here, and all of the usual excess baggage of western civilisation, yet the underlying ethnic character of the island shows through – in the ritual folded and sewn palm frond offerings displayed in every nook, in the tall swaying decorative poles from which they are often suspended in the street, and in the colourful batik skirts worn by women and men and in their pleasant, smiling manner. Having seen Bali you wonder why people deny themselves so much to attain paradise in the after-life when it is already here. And still it's cheap. One could room and board forever in a comfortable hotel for considerably less than it costs to run any life style in London. Once again we picked up a tailor-made wardrobe for around £75 – a three-piece suit of hand-woven itak cloth for Judith, with matching handmade shoes, and a shirt for myself. And as we removed 20 kilometres to Ubud the next day, that sum included one visit by the saleslady to check the fitting and a second for delivery.

As you drive away from the beaches towards the centre of the island you pass through a string of villages, each dedicated to a different art or craft: woodcarving, stone sculpture, painting, weaving or silver artefacts. Ubud village is the cultural heart of Bali, and it is the centre of dance. Though firmly focused on the tourist trade it is utterly charming, with delightful hotels offering views over the green rice fields, excellent restaurants and cafes and rows of shops overflowing with skilfully hand-crafted goods. Ubud is thriving. Occasionally the rice fields run right up to the road, but most of the empty spaces between the buildings are construction sites. At the most attractive hotel Judith acquired a stunning room adjacent to the swimming pool, surrounded by luxuriant foliage, with a private front courtyard and in the rear a marble bathroom with sunken tub open to the sky – shamelessly negotiating a thirty per cent discount.

We had seen an exhibition of Legong dancing at a restaurant in Sanur. This is a classical ritual temple dance performed with delicate gestures by pre-pubescent girls wearing adult make-up and elaborate gold-bedecked costumes. The performance we saw was genuine enough, but unexciting. Except at the end, when the Japanese tourists who had been bussed in for the show crowded onto the stage to have their photographs snapped with the performers. From the jostling for position, this seemed to be the main reason for their attendance. In Ubud, however, the dances we witnessed were dramatic and compelling. Local villagers specialise in particular dances, and every family takes part. One evening we were driven to a small hamlet and sat in the open air in front of a temple framed by towering trees in silhouette against an orange glow from setting sun. In the centre torches blazed from a black metal tower. One hundred male dancers poured down the temple steps onto the packed dirt. They were of all ages, bare-chested and wearing black and white checked sarongs and a red hibiscus flower behind one ear. The performance was *a cappella*, the only music was the chanting sounds of this vigorous chorus. As they formed rings, swaying, standing or squatting in unison they sang “cak cak cak cak” in seven different hypnotic rhythms. This is the kecak, or monkey dance, and against this

brehtaking backdrop female dancers enacted a central episode from the Hindu story, the Ramayana. When his bride, Sita, is kidnapped by the demon king Rawana, Rama and his brother Laksmana rescue her with the aid of the monkey God Hanuman and his army of warrior apes. The roles of both heroes, Rama and Laksmana, are traditionally played by women, and afterwards the comely featured players roared away into the night in full glittering costume, riding pillion on motor scooters behind their male companions.



Kecak is actually a modern invention; it was dreamed up by the German artist and musician Walter Spies who lived here in the 1930s. The story of the Ramayana, however, is ancient and enduring. We saw exactly the same episode again the next night, in the grounds of the Ubud Palace, in a ballet-drama version. It was totally different, yet once again utterly absorbing. Music was provided by a large orchestra of gongs, drums, xylophones, one bamboo flute and a stringed instrument like a lute, and the performance included comic touches, such as an army of endearing child performers in monkey suits,

Temples, or course, were on the cultural trail as well. You can hardly turn around in Bali without seeing one, because every family erects a little wooden hut on stilts with a peaked sloping roof in their yard. As most houses are grouped together in compounds behind low stone walls and these structures rise above them, it appears there are temples everywhere. The holiest and highest public temple complex is at Besakih, where 22 wood-carved edifices

rise on a series of terraces on the slopes of the Gunung Agung volcano, with stunning views across the island. At 3,000 metres this is the highest mountain in Bali even after blowing 100 metres off its top in a disastrous 1963 eruption which destroyed 100,000 homes but left the Besakih temples virtually unscathed. We hired a car to take us there and explore it in solitude before the morning rush of tourist buses. We also went to the Pura Kahen temple at Bangli, forlorn and neglected but with a poignant atmosphere enhanced by a huge banyan tree carrying a ritual *kuk kul* tower high in its branches. And, or course, we visited a weaving factory and bought some batik fabric.

We found a restaurant where we could take our meal sitting cross-legged in a private bamboo loggia in a garden by a flower-fringed pond with a catfish nosing at the lily pads, a croaking frog and the soft plangent sound of a gamelan playing in the background. Sticks of mixed satay and a dish of Betutu duck, smoked and roasted, are the specialties here, both served with nutty rice and a spicy green vegetable on a large leaf in a wooden bowl. We also enjoyed a locally

produced rosé wine labelled Hatten. For puds there was a delicious and complex black rice pudding. Needless to say, we came back again the next night and switched our orders between ourselves.

Everything is more delightful in Paradise. On a stroll through the rice fields towards the volcano on the skyline along gurgling streams and through flowery dells we were enchanted by quacking ducks and the flying jewels of dragonflies. And one or two smiling touts, who offered to climb a palm tree to fetch down a coconut for us.