

## ***SE Asia Journal 2005***

*Bibb Latané*

### **1. Hong Kong-Hanoi**

#### **Friday, July 8**

**18:00-** After a 15-hour flight to Hong Kong, I take the Airport Express train to Kowloon and a cab to the YMCA, where I meet Ladd & Helen. We walk out for a noodle dinner and then to the Star Ferry terminal where we have ice cream and I make an international call and send an email to see whether Blackberry works abroad.

#### **Saturday, July 9**

**13:00-14:30** After a morning at the Museum of Art, Ladd and I fly to Hanoi where I become an instant millionaire just by changing \$75 into Dong. However, I soon find that the exchange rate of 15,000+ Dong to the dollar makes shopping very disorienting.

**15:00-** We negotiate a \$10 fare from a gypsy cab and are tootling along the divided highway to town when the driver pulls over and asks for 300,000D for the toll. Despite seeing uniformed men at the booth ahead and strong pressure from the driver and his friend, we are suspicious and hold off paying until we reach the hotel, where they renew their demand. We appeal to the hotel keeper, who laughs and shoes them away.

**20:00-** Ladd and I are sitting in the auditorium for a "water puppet" show after paying 40,000D each for first class tickets, intimidating, but actually only \$2.75. The show itself is interesting, but the best part is the music, which seems somewhat Celtic. Prices in general are amazingly cheap and walking at night seems safe, except for dodging the "motos", the ~ 120cc motorcycles that buzz the streets like swarms of bees, often with one or two people with packages holding on behind the driver. They are dangerous and scary, as traffic is uncontrolled and no one wears helmets. It took us a while to learn to walk across the street—you must just ignore the traffic and set a steady pace, trusting them to miss you. If you try to dodge, everything becomes unpredictable and chaotic. Everyone is very friendly, though eager to sell stuff.

#### **Sunday, July 10**

**8:00-** Today is our only chance to see Ho Chi Minh's Mausoleum, which is jammed with visitors, mostly Vietnamese. Fortunately, we meet Dueng who offers to get us in without having to wait 3 hours in line. We spend most of the morning with Uncle Ho, also visiting his summer house and his museum, as well as a small temple where we hear another concert of Vietnamese music.

Because the morning works well, we put ourselves in Dueng's hands for the rest of the day, with little idea what we will be in for.



**12:00-** Ladd and I find ourselves on the backs of two Hondas holding on tight. I remember the last time I had ridden on the back of a motorcycle 45 years ago, and that hadn't ended well. Nevertheless we manage to stay upright. Our first stop is the garden of the Temple of Literature, dedicated in 1076 to Confu-



cian scholarship and considered the first University in Vietnam. Now it is completely deserted except for some tourists looking for a quiet place to sit. I catch up on some routine emails and catch a quick snooze, while wondering what to have for lunch.

**13:30-** We are back on the motos for a 7K expedition to a "Snake" Restaurant in the suburbs of Hanoi.



Entering the courtyard, we have a chance to meet several snakes, one of which is suddenly stabbed before our eyes,

its blood drained into a container, and its greenish/blue bile sac and crimson heart cut out and placed, the heart still throbbing, in a bowl.

Climbing to the second floor, we find ourselves in an elegant dining room with lots of carved wood, three open walls, and a fourth lined with 5-gallon glass jars filled with preserved snakes of all kinds. Shot glasses are produced, the fluids from the snake that had been sacrificed on our behalf are mixed with alcohol (two shots with bile, two with blood), and we are told to drink them down in one gulp (I am not sure I could have managed sipping them). Ladd is kind enough to insist that the still-beating heart be added to my glass.

After the toasts, waiters start appearing with entrees—each consisting of some part of the snake cooked in some distinctive way. We have snake omelet, fried snake morsels, snake rolls, snake dumpling, fried snake skin (better than Texas pork rinds), snake steaks, snake soup—15 dishes in all. During the meal, we are offered more drinks—this time, a wide selection of brandies and rice wines drawn directly from the snake-filled jars that line the wall. We are assured that, like the snake's blood cocktails, these drinks are well-known to make men "strong" (later the guide offered to help us find some ladies to admire our strength).

The feast is topped off by watermelon, a prosaic finish to one of the more exotic meals I have experienced! The cost is \$45 for two—probably wildly inflated to cover guide bribe, foreigner surcharge, etc., but nevertheless priceless.

**15:00-** We visit the Museum of Ethnography with its excellent exhibits of minority and tribal groups. Perhaps the most interesting are the reconstructions of traditional habitations—are they a



clue to the puzzling tube houses we have seen both in the city and the countryside?

### Monday, July 12

**8:00-** We dedicate the morning to a walking tour of Hanoi's Old City—a bustling mélange of workrooms, shops, street "diners," bia hoi parlors, parked motos, and pedestrians. The second and third stories are residential, with many buildings having plant-filled balconies overlooking the street. Women of all ages are carrying piles of goods on their heads or in twin panniers of



produce suspended from poles across their shoulders and the sidewalks are filled with people squatting, sitting, standing, or walking, while working, selling, talking, watching, or simply waiting.

Different streets seem to specialize in different things. One street was filled with sheet metal factories making suitcases, cabinets, and watering cans from galvanized iron.

Other streets were devoted to reupholstering moto seats, rebuilding magnetos, carving headstones, small-scale butchery, flower arranging, making "tampon stamps" (wood or rubber chops), making and repairing shoes, sewing and embroidering women's fashions, creating colorful banners and flags, selling Military uniforms, epaulets, and medals, and gilding Buddhas.

The work spills out onto the sidewalks and combines with the plentiful trees and parked motos to make them impassable to pedestrians, who are forced to join the competition for space in the streets.



Throughout the area are guesthouses, booking agents for cafe tours, and net cafes, as well as innumerable people with warm smiles asking "where are you from," and offering to help us find our way. Although most of them turn out to be overly persistent cyclo drivers or walking book and map sellers, it is reassuring to know that it would be hard to really get lost. I look in a few silk shops for saris but find instead sleeping bags—silk bags that fold up into a tiny pouch. I am also able to find a cotton Hapi jacket for when the hotel bath-

room is down the hall (as it turns out, hotels in our price range of \$10-\$20 all have private baths with Western toilets).

**13:00-17:00** Ladd and I split up for the afternoon, with me choosing to spend my time near the small lake that attracted the original settlement of Hanoi almost 1000 years ago (book your tickets now for the millennial celebration in 2010!). Between the City View Cafe on top of the highest building in the Old City (4 stories) and the pagoda on Jade Island, I spend a pleasant few hours with Blackberry and a glass of Tiger draft before heading back to the hotel for my second shower of the day. As we had had to vacate our room at noon, this was from a hand shower connected to the sink in the maids' bathroom, so you can imagine how sweaty I must have been! Sitting is cool enough, but the perspiration pours off me when I walk, a condition I hope will go away as I get in better shape or perhaps as the after-effects of snake wine wear off.



## 2. Hanoi-Hué-Hoi An

**17:30-**The hotel puts us in a cab for the train station. Started in 1976, the Reunification Express symbolizes Vietnamese unity. Averaging about 30 mph, the trains take anywhere from 30 to 42 hours to make the entire journey, so it is best to break it up into segments. In our case, it is a necessity, as we have only been able to book as far as Hué.

When I see an old lady outside the railroad station lugging loaves (panniers de pain?) of Vietnamese bread (a light and tasty descendent of French bread hawked by street vendors during the morning and afternoon rush hours), I raise my eyebrows "How much?" When she raises 5 fingers, I pull out a 5,000D note, only to have our driver grab it, give it to her, and demand change. It turned out the correct price is 1,000D (7c), although I am not sure whether this is set by official edict or street custom. The same loaf is 2,000D at the trackside kiosks, even though there were many of them competing for the same customers.

On boarding, we discover we are to share a four-berth compartment with a family of four. The father smiles a lot, while the mother glowers at us, yells at her two hyperactive boys, and alternates snoring, smoking, and opening the door to see out the other side. I get the lower bunk on our side and am glad I bought the silk sleeping bag—it is cool and sensuous, and great to be able to take off my clothes despite the ratty upholstery and uncertain bedding. At least, the AC works, perhaps a little too well. Nevertheless, I thoroughly enjoy the trip.

During the night, I am inspired with the thought of making an educational video about two retired professors riding the Reunification Express and discussing what they see in terms of human science theories and findings. Still somewhat jet lagged, I realize I can use Blackberry to start drafting a proposal in the dark. After getting over the wild idea that I could play a starring role, I imagine a female and one or two males finding themselves traveling together for the first time since graduate school, where they had lived (and maybe loved) in something like the Center. One could be an economist; one a cultural anthropologist, etc. As they travel, they try to figure out what they are seeing, each bringing a different perspective to bear. For example, noticing the prevalence of "tube" houses, they could speculate on the relative roles of cultural tradition, land ownership rules, local construction materials and practices, climatic adaptation, etc. They also reminisce about the past, their differing reactions to the war and views of human nature, and how these differences affected their own relationship. Thus, the reunification theme has appeal for nations, but in the present project, it can also have meaning for the characters and the disciplines they represent

Vietnam would have a number of advantages as the setting for such a series. Scenic, exotic, historically relevant to Americans and Europeans but with different cultural, economic and political systems, it provides many opportunities for exploring why things are so different from the West as well as how they are so much the same.

### Tuesday, July 12

**6:00-** The conductor distributes paper bowls packaged with dry noodles, which by observation we discover are to be filled with hot water from the dispenser at the end of the corridor. We are rolling through the former DMZ, but the countryside seems especially peaceful, perhaps because of the carnage that took place here. When we arrive in Hué, we are met by Chi, a vivacious young lady sent by the hotel and eager to practice her English.



**9:00-** Because we are too late for the regular tours, Chi helps us charter a Dragon Boat and guide to cruise the Perfume River and visit the tombs of the Nguyen Dynasty kings. Lily says little beyond her memorized spiel but is pleasant enough. Although these mausolea are more elaborate than Uncle Ho's, they are less popular. Clearly, simply erecting a big building does not ensure a big place in history. The captain and her daughter cook and serve the lunch packed by the hotel and we sit cross-legged on the deck to eat it—another priceless lunch!



### Wednesday, July 13

**7:00-** Most of the Caucasian faces in Vietnam belong to the hordes of 20-something backpackers who gather in tourist cafes to share experiences, meet one another, and catch rides on the cafe bus system that connects the popular destinations. We join them in the cafe across from our hotel for the first leg of our open ticket to Ho Chi Minh City (we learned in Hanoi that space on the train was all booked up). We plan to go to Hoi An, an older city spared by both sides in the war and now a World Heritage site.

**11:00-** At a rest break before reaching Danang, a big water cost 10,000D. Fifty paces down the road, the same water is 5,000D. Nevertheless, the first place is jammed, the second deserted.

**13:00-** Hoi An is a charming old city clearly slated for tourist development. Showing the posi-



itive side of a planned economy for culture, it is a city of arts, with more than 24 galleries on one picturesque street alone. Now muddy and piled with pavers, the riverfront promenade should soon be very pleasant, and there are restaurants and



shops catering to the expat NGO crowd who come from HCMC for family weekends.

### Thursday, July 14

Because our hotel (Thanh Van) is graced with an especially charming courtyard swimming pool, we devote the day to R&R, venturing out only to eat and to prepare ourselves mentally for the 24-bus ride to HCMC.

**18:00-** On balance, it is lucky we are among the last to be picked up, giving us very little choice of seats. On the negative side, we have to sit over a wheel well, making for an uncomfortable night in our extremely cramped seats. On the positive, we are just across the aisle from two engaging young Vietnamese men, both of whom are home on vacation from their studies at the National University of Singapore. Thai, (Le Hoang Thai [-acemili@yahoo.com](mailto:-acemili@yahoo.com)) is studying electrical engineering and has taken up golf in order to meet people. Mike (Nhu Duy [Hiep-hiepnhu252@yahoo.com](mailto:Hiep-hiepnhu252@yahoo.com)) is studying economics and statistics. Both are on scholarships from NUS and will have to work in Singapore for three years after graduation.

### Friday, July 15

**6:00-** The ordeal ends as we arrive at Nha Trang, fast developing into an upscale beach resort, and are able to get a good breakfast, and, two hours later, better seats on a newer bus for the leg to HCMC.

On an all-too-brief stop at a charming fishing port and beach named Phan Thiet, Mike & Thai catch up with us and invite us to join them at a beachfront restaurant named Lam Tong Quan.

We have boiled collards, a steamed, very toothy, whole fish, rice w/collard broth, & Tiger beer. Mike and Thai insist on paying, saying that in Vietnam the young are expected to treat the old. Fortunately for them, the total bill is under 100,000D.

### 3. Ho Chi Minh City

**19:00-** We arrive in HCMC, taxi to the budget hotel district, walk to a hotel picked from Lonely Planet, find it is full, engage a grumpy middle-aged lady for \$2 to help us find another place, try several with no luck, and finally find a tiny windowless room for \$10 at Lê Trung Hotel. They promise a better room tomorrow for \$15.

#### Saturday, July 16

**8:00-** We check into a new room—much bigger but up 7 flights of stairs. It is well worth it as it has many windows and a wonderful view over the city. It also exemplifies the problem with the basic design of Vietnamese buildings—because they are so narrow, there are often only 2-3 rooms per floor, with only the front and back rooms having outside windows.

**9:00-** Motos to Reunification Palace, last stand of the South Vietnamese regime.

**11:00-** Ladd wants to check out all the gory stuff at the War Remnants Museum (Tiger cages and other atrocity exhibits), but I am happy to sit on a park bench under a tree and work on my Blackberry. Soon, a man with no arms below the elbows sits down beside me to sell some books. He tells me he lost his arms in an accident after the war, in 1977. He is interested in my Blackberry, which he somehow manages gracefully to pick up between his stumps. I am not sure whether his main goal is to see the Blackberry or to show me he can still function without hands.



A little later, Mark Nerlich, a well-dressed 33 year-old man with a Vietnamese face but excellent, if somewhat accented, English, sits down and comments about the wonderful Vietnamese capacity for forgiveness. It turns out this is his first trip as an adult to Vietnam. After being orphaned in 1972 when his Mekong delta village was destroyed by American bombs, he was adopted by two German pacifist activists and raised in the international NGO network. Now, with his extensive contacts and a computer degree, he is an executive with an IT consulting firm, for whom he will soon be opening a Kuala Lumpur office. At lunch with Ladd and me, Mark gets excited by my description of the Reunification Express project and volunteers to help.



**18:00-** I discover that Blackberry can be used for local calls and make a



reservation at Banh Xeo 46A, recommended for its Vietnamese rice-flour crêpes. We set out by moto, but it soon starts raining. No problem—the driver simply whips out a poncho, pulls it over his head, and indicates I am to huddle under it behind him. No problem, that is, if one has no tendencies toward claustrophobia, lack of balance, or need for knowing where one is going—all of which afflict me at least a little.

When we arrive, we realize we do not remember the exact name and are faced with TWO competing restaurants across a narrow street from one another, both with slight variants of the same name, both popular,



both consisting basically of picnic tables and kitchens set up outdoors in facing alleys. Fortunately, someone from the more crowded place (the owner) spies us, asks if we were the ones who called, and clears away one end of a communal table. We are the only Western faces, but feel no hostility from the cheerful crowd of couples, families, and groups of friends. The owner, probably a child during the war, keeps an eye on us, fortunate because no one else seems to have any English at all. The crêpes are delicious.

#### 4. Saigon-Siem Reap

##### Sunday, July 17

**7:00-** To get to the Cambodian border by boat, we must first join a small (~30 people, all European) bus tour to My Tho in the Mekong delta. There, at an interesting street and floating seafood and general market, we transfer our bags to a 24' covered vessel for a cruise to the Dragon Island longan orchards and fish farm where we have lunch.

Then to another island where we transfer to an even smaller (~18'X4', 8 pax) boat to go far up a small, winding waterway lined w/ water coconut and other vegetation. It is sort of spooky, and I am well able to imagine the terror of American grunts dropped there under hostile circumstances.

We stop for honey tea at a coconut plantation and candy factory, with a concert from 2 female vocalists, accompanied by a Vietnamese 5-string guitar, 1-string violin, and banjo. Again, the music seems very Appalachian, w/minor chords and the plaintive bagpipe sound of the violin.



**14:30-** Finally, we transfer to the smallest boat of all, carrying only 4 people and paddled by two ladies, for a trip up another winding waterway to a village where everyone greets us warmly.

**16:00-** Back in My Tho, after some confusion, we are loaded on a local open-windowed bus and set off on a long, uncomfortable ride to Chau Doc. We are the only tourists aboard, and, apart from having to sit at the back, feel welcome. There is no one to ask what time we should get to Chau Doc.

**17:30-** Three men hail the bus, pass the driver some money, and push on board a completely soused, very thin man who lurches back to us in the rear. Quiet for a while, he launches into a plaintive folk song, oddly pleasant.

**18:00-** Crossroads are rare, far fewer than bridges, and houses and businesses are intermingled in a one-dimensional lineup along the long, long road, rather than on a two-dimensional city grid. Thus social space tends to be relatively linear. We pass many roadside cafes with lawn chairs set out for patrons to watch the passing parade, which is more populous than if the same number of people were traversing a city. The same must be true for those who live along the river, with everyone having fewer neighbors at any given distance and finding it easier to keep track of their movements.

**19:00-** Suddenly, just after a toll booth, we enter an expressway with a high bridge over a much larger span of Mekong. The driver speeds up far above his usual 20mph pace and I think we may be on the outskirts of Chau Doc. This hope is dashed as soon as we reach the other side.

**20:00-** We pull over to another rest stop and wait—only to find eight more people, including three nice Mormon girls, cramming in. To make matters worse, the road narrows to 1.5 lanes and becomes much bumpier. The final straw (I pray) is a street fair—colorful, lively, but bringing traffic to a standstill.



This is our friend Bibb. We met him on the bus ride to the border of Cambodia. He was traveling with his friend Ladd from graduate school. Both are professors in social psychology. Both have been successful in their research. Bibb and Ladd seemed to smile the entire time... Not only do I hope to have some of the same friends in fifty years, I also hope to be brave enough to travel through Cambodia with those friends in fifty years—and I would like to request that those friends I travel with fifty years from now would smile in the worst of conditions. Posted by Tanya Mae Ellis <http://anyatamae.blogspot.com/2005/07/this-is-our-friend-bibb.html>

**23:00-** After an interminable three more hours punctuated only by an enjoyable 30-minute ferry break, we finally arrive in Chau Doc. Ladd and I and our three new friends are shown to a rather seedy \$10 hotel, offered AC for an additional \$3, and told to meet in the lobby at 6:15am for the boat to see the fish farms, visit a Cham village, and head on to Cambodia.

## 5. Chau Doc-Siem Reap

### Monday, July 18



**6:45-** Ladd and I catch the boat to marvel at the 'efishieny' of raising catfish in the river under one's houseboat and wonder what it does for the rice crops downstream. We also visit a Cham village, where I buy 3 pieces of handmade fabric to use up my last Dong.

Even on the river, Vietnam's exit formalities are rigorous (far more than Cambodia's entry procedures), including unloading and screening all baggage.



**16:00-** Our taxi driver in Pnomh Penh (P2) convinces us we need to buy our boat tickets at the dock immediately (not true, as they are cheaper at the hotel) and tries hard to sell us on the "Royal Hiness Hotel" (new and dirt cheap, but with a terrible location). Fortunately, we are able to escape his clutches and get a riverfront room at the "Sun Shine Hotel." The room is rather seedy but large, nicely equipped with 2 comfortable wicker chairs, AC, TV, and a great view, all for \$20. Unlike Vietnam, however, breakfast is not included.



### Tuesday, July 19 (My Birthday!)-

**9:00-** After breakfast, Ladd and I split up and I head to the FCC (Foreign Correspondents Club), nicely located between the river and the palace, where I nurse 2 pots of tea at the breezy 2nd floor bar while catching up on email on their fast wifi. After an hour, the power goes out, killing the wifi and the fans, so I head off for the old luxury, presumably generator-equipped, Hotel Le Royal.

**10:00-** Along the way, I explore the market, a French bookstore, and the original Wat on a hill, feeling pretty good about myself for still having the competence, confidence, and physical endurance to function in exotic places without having to rely on group tours or high-end hotels.

**11:30-** At Le Royal, I ensconce myself in the Writer's Bar with a gin and tonic and more wifi for several hours until 3:30, time to meet Ladd. The only problem—the afternoon rain has started. Undaunted, I figure this will be a good chance to try out one of my cheap disposable ponchos and set out through the downpour—only to discover after a few blocks that keeping my head dry is not the problem, but my feet, as the streets and sidewalks have become flooded with up to 18" of water. Fortunately, I am able to jump on a moto and ride home with my feet above the flood.

**16:00-** Ladd reports on his day, says he was most moved by the Tuel Sleng Museum, a former school in which the Khmer Rouge tortured and killed thousands of Cambodians. The KR carefully documented all the people killed at Tuel Sleng, and thousands of the victims' photos are on



display. Everyone we talked to in Cambodia had lost family members from 1975-79. Three of seven million people died, from starvation, American bombing, and Khmer Rouge murder. After dinner, we see an interesting documentary about Pol Pot's social vision and turn in early for our 7am departure for Siem Reap. All in all, despite the disquieting reminders of how high ideals can lead to horrendous outcomes, not a bad day for an old man.

### Wednesday, July 20

**6:30-** While Ladd takes a TukTuk, I walk 15 minutes up the Promenade to the boat, wheeling my suitcase behind. It is starting to bulge ominously with everything I have bought, and I will soon have to pull out the bag inside. As we expect to rely on planes after Siem Reap, this may not be a problem.



**13:00-** We arrive outside Siem Reap and transfer to a smaller boat through the long boat-lined canal known as the Vietnamese Floating Village. We soon run into a traffic jam caused by a large houseboat being moved closer to Siem Reap in anticipation of higher lake levels. In fact, we learn that all boats and even the houses along the road are repeatedly moved up and down season by season. Houses, built on stilts, are floated by boat coming under and then lifting them.

The floating village is bustling, with houseboats, grocery store boats, farmers market boats, dress shop boats, restaurant boats, cafe boats, a church boat (Christian), and even a snooker boat with two pool tables. There are fish farm boats, workshop boats, and gas tanker boats, along with boat yard boats to fix all the other boats. School bus boats oared by children each carry a dozen or more school kids to the school boats. There is even a pigsty boat, with five fat porkers stretched out at ease.



**14:00-** We are met by Sophiap Prem, Ian Lubek's driver, who is standing in the crowd with a big smile and a sign saying "Welcome Professors Ladd Wheeler and Bibb Lattané." As we drive the 6K into town, he tells us that late rains this year will lead to food shortages and that Tiger mosquitoes are very dangerous, especially to children, causing dengue fever in the rainy season and making me feel better about the two types of repellent I have been lugging around (I still never got to use them). Sophiap's father was killed as an intellectual because he wore glasses, and two of his sisters died of starvation. Now he is doing



well, with his own car, but supports an extended family of 20 people.

**15:00-** We arrive at the Salina Hotel, where we meet Ian. He is a big middle-aged professor at the University of Guelph who spends three months a year in Siem Reap working with an NGO (Non-Governmental Organization) he has personally established to use social psychological methods and principles to deal with the terrible problems of AIDS among beer girls and poverty among temple urchins. (Ladd had met Ian, who spends more months every year in Sydney) at this year's Australasian Social Psychology meetings. Late lunch in hotel, unsuccessful trip to travel agents to book tickets, dinner at beer hall to watch Ian and Sophiap interview a beer girl.

### Thursday, July 21

**8:00-** We go to Laos Airlines, where we discover that I will not be able to visit Laos at all, as I cannot get from Louang Prabang to Bangkok without spending a night in Vientiane, and Vientiane is closed to foreigners during an ASEAN minister's meeting.

**9:00-** Our guide for the Angkor ruins is Lom Tek, a 45-year old man who is full of facts in the morning, replaced by giggles in the afternoon.



Like everyone else we meet in Cambodia, his life was drastically affected by Pol Pot, losing relatives and having to get married and move to the countryside to avoid getting killed himself. Now with 7 kids, he has moved back to the city.



We spend the morning at Angkor Thom with its Bayon Temple, the afternoon at Ta Prohm now overgrown with fantastic figs, pondering the rise and fall of kings and kingdoms and the links of religion with power. Both complexes were built by the great warrior King Jayavarman VII (J7), who died ~1220 at age of 96. Apparently, the sack of Angkor in 1177 caused great psychological damage by proving that the palace of gods was not invincible. Perhaps to reassure his subjects, J7 converted to Mahajana (Big Vehicle) Buddhism and started a vast frenetic building campaign resulting in hundreds of monuments.



#### Questions:

1. Why did kings build so many temples? (political vs. religious vs. psychological explanations)
2. Did these building binges hasten or delay the ensuing collapse?
3. Was J7 a success or a failure?

#### Friday, July 22

**14:00-** Angkor Wat is fantastic (I use the morning to catch up on pool, email)



### Saturday, July 23

**8:00-** We take a long drive to Banteau Srey, a well-carved temple, but spend the afternoon reading, swimming, and playing chess. I break a streak by losing two games to Ladd.

**20:00-** We attend the weekly Beatocello Concert in a elegant modern concert hall next to a well-equipped hospital. Dr. Beat Richner, a Swiss pediatrician, alternates playing Bach, showing short films, and giving long harangues about corruption, justice, and how Cambodian children deserve the same medical care as European children. He says:

1. People in poor countries deserve as good medical facilities as people in rich countries. They need CT scanners for correct diagnoses. It is arrogance or neo-colonialism to think otherwise.
2. His patients never pay, meaning there is no corruption in his hospitals.

3. Endemic tuberculosis is a consequence of the war brought by Kissinger-Nixon. With no justice there can be no peace, so the world needs need a just medical infrastructure (presumably by treating children from poor countries equally).



4. International advisors jet into Siem Reap, stay at Sofitel (\$340), and then say Beatocello is spending too much on his children.

The music, films, and spiel are moving and Dr. Richner is passionate in his belief that much more should be spent on the best of medical care. However, it was a bit incongruous sitting in such a nice facility in the midst of such poverty.

Counterargument: Why isn't the right to a decent education as important as state-of-the-art medical care, possibly even providing a more cost-effective way of improving health in the long run?

### **Sunday, July 24**

We make a very interesting visit with Ian to Les Artisans d'Angkor, a silk farm/factory established by a French NGO, now a self-sustaining enterprise. Les Artisans provides a third (after Lubek & Richner's) model of western philanthropy in the third world. Les Artisans is one of the many NGOs trying to help by training people to be wood carvers, silk weavers, cooks, waiters, hotel personnel, masseuses, and sales clerks. Such jobs allow people to support themselves and their extended families.

Vietnam seems to have fewer NGO's, perhaps because its Communist government is less welcoming than Cambodia's constitutional monarchy. Nevertheless, it is opening up quickly and seems in better shape to make it than Cambodia. With 81 million people, a Confucian heritage, and a strong government, Vietnam is booming, whereas Cambodia, with 14 million people, terrible corruption, and a Theravada Buddhist belief system, hasn't much going for it except timber and tourism. Ladd thinks this belief system encourages people to accept the way things are because they have earned them in a past life.



### **Monday, July 25**

Emails, swimming, chess, shopping, massage, and a final dinner at FCC w/Ladd & Ian.

## **7. Siem Reap-Battambang**

### **Tuesday, July 26**

**5:45** Perhaps because of the ungodly hour or perhaps because of the lost decades of schooling, the checkout clerk gets confused when I tell him I want to pay only for half the room. After several minutes of calculation with a pencil and again with a calculator, he presents me with a bill for \$480, not bad for a six night stay in a luxury hotel w/restaurant and pool, but double the promised \$40/night room rate. I do not think this is an attempted scam, as he seems grateful when I show him how to do the math.

**6:00** My box breakfast and car arrive promptly and I have another fascinating ride to and through the floating village. Roadside life is very active, with hordes of bikes and motos, many pulled over for some breakfast. The boat is another lowslung inboard, about 50' long and 13' wide, with upholstered seating for 36 inside, and perhaps another 12-20 on the roof. I am the only passenger there, and I begin to worry that the trip will be cancelled.

**7:15** At the last minute, 22 people speaking French arrive and the boat leaves. From their ages, I wonder if they are 18 college students chaperoned by two professorial couples.

**8:15-8:45** Cruising through a sea of hyacinth, we reach another floating village. We make four stops to pick up local passengers and one to clear chewed up hyacinth leaves from the clogged engine cooling system.



**9:00-10:00** We pass more floating villages and pick up or drop off more passengers. The procedure is simple—our boat honks like crazy to alert everyone that we are here, we come to a stop in midstream, and soon a small 8-10' standard decked "canoe" appears. Passengers are usually all dressed up just as airline passengers used to be, and they flash big smiles at whoever delivers them, suggesting they are family. We also stop to deliver sacks and boxes. We even stop once to throw a cat into a boat with a beaming woman holding its twin.



**10:30** As we get upstream, the shores are higher, now lined with trees, and some houses are starting to appear, but still on stilts. The river is narrow enough that we slow when passing other boats—otherwise they would be rocked by our wake. We pass a flotilla of 18 small boats, each loaded with sticks, each with one man (perhaps the woodcutter) aboard, all towed by a single canoe w/an outboard.

We see many floating fishing rigs. These usually take up perhaps 100' of riverside, and are maybe 30' wide. Upstream seems to be some sort of breakwater, possibly designed to catch a bed of hyacinth, extending diagonally downstream from riverbank. Then a Rube Goldberg-appearing contraption apparently designed to raise or lower a large (maybe 25x25') square net from/into the water. Constructed of long ~30' poles tied to make 2 triangular shapes with a ~15' base linked by wires and pulleys so whole thing can be rocked forward, dropping the net suspended from two crossed poles from the forward apex, or rocked back, bringing the net out of the water. At the rear is a small cabin, but I couldn't tell if it was for the fishnet tenders to sleep in.

**11:00** We stop for refreshments and a toilet break at a tidy floating 15' sq tin-roofed convenience store and three-table restaurant at which three locals are eating. The toilet is in an outhouse suspended over the river. I do not find out whether it is western-style, with a bench.

Just upstream is a 25' sq raft with fish farm under, chicken coops over, and sticks and hyacinth beside. Many houses have antennas, and my Blackberry connects to Mobitel. Other villages also seem to have power, presumably from local generators, and Mobitel seems to reach about half the river.

**11:15** We are in an even smaller and windier river with many horseshoe and oxbow bends, honking just like bus drivers before every curve. It is slow going, as all the straight areas are lined with 15' and smaller houseboats so we can't even speed up between the bends. The captain has trouble with many of the bends, sometimes having to back up, sometimes to be pushed off, perhaps because of shoaling or perhaps just the difficulty of steering a long (50') single engine boat in a narrow (30') river. The water is fast-moving and very brown, probably great for grow-

ing rice in the Mekong Delta. The style of fishing seems to have changed to 12"x36"x36" box nets and biconal 18"x48" wicker fish traps.

**12:00-** All the deck passengers are asked to move inside, presumably to avoid being raked by the vegetation on the banks or thrown overboard when the Captain accelerates suddenly. Fortunately, there is some AC, although it is very crowded. The boat is now overbooked, and about half the passengers are river people. We are grounded for 10 minutes at one bend. When the deckhands use a pole to push us off, it sticks in the mud. I am glad I have an extra day to get to Bangkok.

**1:00** We are seeing crops along the river, and some cows. There was a machine for milling something, but I am not sure what. I am ready to get to Battambang so I can figure out what I will do next—continue on to Poipet or Aranyaprathet at the Thai border or stay overnight. Trains for Bangkok leave at 6:30 and 1:30, so I have missed any chance for today. Buses apparently run until 10pm. If I can be confident of getting there by the 1:30 train tomorrow, I will probably stay over.

**2:00-** The riverbank is now lined with stilt houses and haystacks built around poles or trees with cows eating around their bases. Most houses have two or three large (48" dia, 36" ht) crocks underneath. I see no pumps. A motoferryboat carries one or two bicycles or motos across river.

**2:30** We start to see some fences and bridges, and a Big Wat. Hopeful.

**2:45** At this time of year, the water must be very shallow in places—otherwise I am at a loss to explain the sudden slowdowns and speedups which do not seem to relate to passing traffic or boats at risk of wake.

**3:00** Unfortunately, my hypothesis is almost immediately confirmed, as the boat suddenly stops, struggles to pull off the bottom, and goes back downstream where it ties up to a steep embankment with a stick ladder and we are all motioned to get off.

Hoping that it is only the French that are being asked to leave, I hang back. Soon I see my bags being offloaded too and find myself clambering up the slope. Of course, it starts to rain. Waiting under a tree, I watch the chaos of motos and backpackers, hoping that perhaps a taxi will happen along this deserted dirt road.

Apparently the motos are asking too much (I overheard \$5 and \$3) and the backpackers are starting to walk, so I follow along, wheeling my suitcase along the road and thinking that town must be pretty close. Of course, the backpackers are faster than me, so soon I am pretty much alone.

After about 300 yards, as I am starting to doubt my incisive analysis of the situation, a middle-aged woman steps out from the side of the road and says four magic words: "Moto; Battambang, One, Dollar." Of course, I say yes, and loading one suitcase in front of the driver (her husband?) and one between us, we set off for a 20 minute ride to town.

## **8. Battambang-Bangkok**

**15:30** I arrive at the Royal Hotel, book the front seat in a shared car for the four hour ride to the border at 7:30am for a \$1.50 premium over the normal \$6 rate, negotiate a \$2 reduction from the normal \$20 rate for a very large room with king bed, AC, and balcony, and have a \$4 meal of Beef koc kac and fruit salad in the rooftop restaurant.

**18:00** A drenching rain starts as I have a late walk through the market and along the river. The color of the sky is compatible with the color of the city.

The most visible brand names after Tiger and Anchor beers are Nokia and Mobitel, with Raid trailing behind.

**18:30** Back in the hotel, I book a massage for 7, buy some crackers and pate, go up and shower, get a \$5 one hour special, and settle down with CNN, a drink, and the last of the peanut butter.

### Wednesday, July 27

**7:00-** I reconfirm my ride, have breakfast upstairs, and pay up.

**7:30-** I set out for Poipet with a young French couple and a 78-year-old South African man named Ron.

**9:00-** Sisophon is a large dreary town with many phone shops and terrible potholes in the streets. After Sisophon, the road becomes much worse—more pothole than pavement. It would be better had it never been paved. The ride was actually rather enjoyable, much better than what one can pay big bucks for in an amusement park. My lasting memory will be of passing a big truck on the left while another car was passing it on the right, all lurching from pothole to pothole—three abreast on a two-lane road, if you could call it that.



Filling stations line the road—at one point, I saw eight of them side by side on the right, with six more on the left. Of course, a "filling station" is nothing more than a roadside stand selling large Coca Cola bottles refilled with gasoline.



**10:30-** We get to Poipet where we are met by young men offering to load our bags on a cart. In contrast to the guidebooks, however, they do not swarm us. Perhaps Ian's teachings have reached this far!

Cambodian exit formalities are quick and painless—the only disconcerting thing is that they carefully take a picture with a webcam. I think of the stories about how the Khmer Rouge were careful to take pictures of their victims too. It is a 300 yard walk to Thai Immigration and Customs, both low-tech in comparison to Vietnam and Cambodia.

Ron, the French couple, and I negotiate with mini-buses-3000 Baht (\$75) to hire a whole one, or 300 per person if we wait for a full 10 passengers. Instead, we take an 80 Baht TukTuk (50c pp) ride to the bus station in Amprathet and buy a \$5 ticket to Bangkok.

Therefore, the total fare from Siem Reap to Bangkok adds up to \$15 (boat), \$1 (moto), \$7 (sharecar), 50c (Tuk Tuk), \$5 (bus), or just over \$30 including the \$2 cabfare from the bus stop to the Comfort Inn at the airport, where the room, dinner, and a massage cost \$70—outrageously high compared to anything else on the trip. Add another \$30 (Battambang room + massage+2 meals), in total saving \$150 over the cost of flying from Siem Reap. Pretty good, considering the two wonderful days of touring thrown in for free.

### Thursday, July 28

**4:45-** I get up for the free shuttle for my flight home, changing planes in Narita and O'Hare. It should take about 24-hours. All in all, I am amazed at how much adventure one can have for some frequent flyer miles, a few dollars, and a good friend.