

Indo China – Three small tastes: Laos, Vietnam and Cambodia

While working for Peace Corps Response (formerly Crisis Corps), I lived in Washington, DC for about a year – late 2006 to late 2007 – with several months’ absences as described previously to work in the Philippines and Moldova. During the summer I was able to enjoy the annual Smithsonian Folklife Festival. Each year they feature a region of the U.S. as well as some region of the world with invited representatives of extensive cultural aspects of the region presenting



performances and exhibits. Little did I know in the summer of 2007 that “Mekong River: Connecting Cultures” was about my home for the next two years! During the 10-day festival I received a great backgrounding on a region starting from the river’s source in Yunnan Province, China through Burma, Laos, Thailand, and Cambodia to its delta in Vietnam.

Due to the somewhat last-minute finalization of my move to Thailand I arrived in December, 2007 without a visa in my official passport. This worked out nicely for me in the end as I had to exit across a border each 30 days until I had my Thai residency. So, in mid-January I spent a weekend in Vientiane, Laos. Vientiane was a lovely, quiet capital city, with many colonial-era buildings remaining/restored. It was, however, full of expats - it seemed as if every international aid organization was represented there. Walking around the city every other structure was either a magnificent Wat (temple), or WHO, FAO, MSF, CARE, etc. with traffic consisting mostly of their SUV’s.

They have their own arc de triomphe, Patuxai, which was built in the 1960’s and according to lore, used cement donated by the U.S. for construction of an airport runway. To my surprise, government buildings’ signage (new, gold lettering on black granite) were in French as well as Lao language, despite independence from France since 1954. I wasn’t yet missing French food, but cheeses and wine were abundant and affordable.

I love to visit restored colonial hotels (such as Raffles in Singapore), listen to the conversations of those in the bar, and learn about local history. The one in Vientiane is called Settha Palace Hotel and although I seem not to have taken a photo, here is a stock photo of the bar.





Staying in a Russian-type hotel I was interested to see that each room had a shoe-polishing kit and to realize that tea was the standard breakfast beverage, coffee was an extra charge. When traveling in Russia some years later I learned tea was the national beverage (other than vodka, of course).

In addition to Patuxai, the major sight is Pha That Luong, Great Stupa, the most important national monument in Laos and which appears on the national seal. It was built in the mid-16th C when the then-King moved the capital from Luang Prabang to Vientiane, and has been re-built many times.



Wat Si Saket, the oldest surviving Wat, from 1824, contains upwards of 7000 Buddha's. Here are a few of them.



I also visited a market much like the weekly souks in small Moroccan towns, or flea markets elsewhere.



Vientiane sits on the Mekong River whose width varies with the seasonal rains. At the end of the day of walking I enjoyed a beer overlooking the (mostly dry) river towards Thailand. The next day I took a bus to the “Friendship Bridge” and walked across the border back into Thailand, receiving a new 30-day visa.



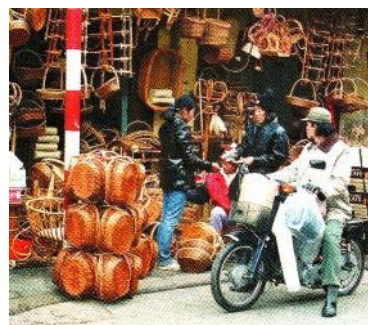
The next month I went to Hanoi for a long weekend. It was Tet (2008 lunar New Year, Vietnam’s most important holiday) so the city was “quiet” as most shops were closed. However, the Vietnamese were celebrating, making offerings in the temples for this festival of purity and renewal, and gathering in large extended family groups around a kumquat tree. I always wondered what they were – anyone remember the musical The Fantastiks? The kumquat is in every household at Tet, here is the one in the lobby of my hotel.



Fresh peach blossoms are also a part of the celebration to symbolize the coming of spring. There were balloons and flowers and street entertainment everywhere.



I stayed in the old quarter where the streets are named after traditional trades and products – silk, iron, bronze, hats, etc. Normally the traffic looked more like what these postcard photos (courtesy of Minh Loc circa 2006) show, in contrast to the calm of Vientiane or Hanoi during Tet.



In Thai Buddhism there is a different Buddha (sitting, standing, laying down, varied hand positions etc.) for each day of the week on which you were born. Wednesday, my day of birth, actually has two – one if you were born in the morning (me) and one if you were born later in the day. I wanted one of “mine” which is a standing Buddha holding an alms bowl. I simply wasn’t finding any standing Buddhas at all until I found this one in the bronze area of old town Hanoi.



Next to old town is Lake Hoan Kiem, Turtle Lake, whose temple, located on a small island, is highly revered. There was a steady stream of celebrants crossing the bridge to bring offerings.



The Red Pagoda, Tran Quoc, is the oldest Buddhist pagoda in Hanoi, dating from 541 when it was located on the Red River.

Relocated in the 17th C it now sits on a small islet, Golden Fish, in West Lake.



Water Puppets are a very old form of theater in northern Vietnam dating from 11th C entertainment carried out in flooded rice paddies. An orchestra plays on traditional instruments and singers tell the story being acted out on the water by the puppets whose puppeteers are hidden behind a screen. Many traditional tales include battle scenes with “smoke” as well as dragons.



Although the musicians at the theater weren't dressed like those above, I bought the set of musicians as a keepsake.



Speaking of turtles and dragons, there are many animals, real and imaginary, with important symbolism in Vietnam. This pair of candlesticks I bought combines many of them: turtle for longevity, strength and intelligence; dragon for power, nobility and immortality; and egret for wisdom. I think that covers just about everything anyone could want!

By the time of this visit I was ready to indulge in some French food at Café des Arts near my hotel.



The Sofitel

Legend Metropole is the Raffles-type hotel of Hanoi dating from 1901. For US\$18 in the afternoon there was an all-you-can-eat chocolate buffet. Imagine chocolate concoctions of every sort you have ever experienced and more! I counted more than 40 offerings. I'm not sure how many I actually consumed but there were also fruit on offer and a high tea available.

I returned to Vietnam a few months later, joining an RPCV Morocco friend on a few days' visit to Hue and Hoi An. I highly recommend taking a cooking class in Hoi An which started with a visit to the local market where the class shopped and learned the names of local ingredients, then took a boat to the school's site.



We prepared a lunch of steamed fish and other goodies and then dined on it. We bought the tools for carving roses out of tomatoes and other garnishes which of course my friend, chef that she is, has accomplished many times. My tools remain in a drawer. Here we are at school.

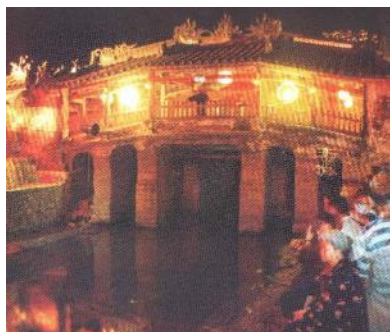


Although the hum of sewing machines is constant for the made-to-order clothing market, it was the hand-made lanterns that captivated me. In gorgeous colors and shapes they especially romanticized the town along the Thu Bon river at night. I bought three for my Agadir apartment, two in dark purple and red and a pale purple one which these shopkeepers/artisans



are holding in these photos.

Hoi An was a major trading port from the 17th to 19th centuries with Dutch and Portuguese traders exchanging goods with those from China and Japan. The well-to-do merchant Tan Ky's house (~1800) has been preserved. It contains both Chinese and Japanese design influences and at the time of my visit was occupied by the family that had lived there for seven



generations who opened it to visitors for a small fee. The covered Japanese Pagoda bridge at left dates from 1593 and was built to connect the Japanese community to the Chinese neighborhood across a stream.

Major restoration efforts achieved UNESCO World

Heritage designation for the old town in 1999. The waterfront was still very active and I found the food in Vietnam fabulous – equally on a par with Thailand.





Hue is a very different city from Hoi An. It was the capital of the Nguyen dynasty from 1802-1945 and the attractions center around the dynasty's palaces and mausoleums which are numerous. I also was conscious of water because not only is Hue on the Perfume River, there are also canals throughout the old city and lakes created on the various sites. The Tran Tien bridge, 1899, by Gustav Eiffel spans the river.

We visited a few sites, including Thien Mu Pagoda on a hill overlooking the river. Founded in 1601, its most famous structure is



the seven-storey Thap Phuoc Duyen

octagonal tower built in 1844. Each storey is dedicated to a Buddha who appeared in human form.



Many other structures occupy the site including this pavilion with an enormous (1051 kg) bell cast in 1710 and said to be audible 10 km away, this pagoda, meditation and artwork.



The tomb of Minh Mang who only ruled from 1820 to 1840 is also a beautiful site including a lake.



Another lake, Tinh Tam, was also a peaceful site.



The “dragon boats” were our primary transport among the various sites and we were occasionally joined by non-human visitors.

Fishing remains an important part of the economy and I saw types of boats I hadn’t seen elsewhere.





An interesting aspect of the food was that often vegetarian dishes were flavored as if they contained meat. An example is this stuffed pastry in the shape of a sow and her piglets which truly did taste as if it contained pork but did not.

Silk painting was another art form I bought, and this gouache of two women continues to remind me how welcoming the Vietnamese were.



A PCV completing her service in Morocco came to visit Thailand and we took a weekend tour to Luang Prabang, a UNESCO heritage city in Laos. It is a beautiful, peaceful place where the Mekong river is joined by the Nam Khan river and is surrounded by dramatic mountains.



The town is very walkable and some memorable sights included the night handicrafts market



and Wat Xieng Thong.

Wat Xieng Thong dates from about 1560 and is one of few remaining temples that was never destroyed during the country's history of wars. The long sloping roofs are known as the Luang Prabang style of architecture and there is a beautiful tree of life mural on one wall, made of glass tile mosaics, as are many of the other decorations in the complex.



Participating in the morning alms-giving to the monks and novices is an important tradition for townspeople, and visitors are permitted to participate, which, of course, we did. The monks and novices start their day at 4 am with chanting and prayers. Then, about 5-5:30 am, depending on the season, they leave their monasteries and walk the streets in long lines to receive their daily food which consists of sticky rice, fruits and vegetables. The process, known as Sai Bat occurs in total silence. We purchased a bowl of sticky rice from a vendor and took our places along the street about 6 am.



We also took a day boat trip along the Mekong where one can get a sense of life along the river, explore the Pak Ou cave temples and visit a weavers' village.



This is the lower cave temple, Tham Ting.



Always a sucker for handicrafts, especially bought directly from the artisan, I acquired a beautiful table runner and solid-color neck scarves.

Here is a photo courtesy of Song Phonepaseuth of Nang Sang Karn at Pii Mai Festival in Laos.



Also, while I was based in Thailand, Peace Corps organized a training for all of the program/training officers of our region (EMA: Europe, Mediterranean, Asia). We traveled to Siem Reap, Cambodia, for several days of training and had the opportunity to do some touring as well.

I had no idea that Angkor Wat was only a very small part of the city which at the peak of the Khmer Kingdom (14th C) housed a million people and was the largest city in southeast Asia. The Archeological Park, which became a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1992 covers 400 square kilometers. Here is an aerial view of the Angkor Wat portion, postcard photo courtesy of Sok Sothy.



I was extremely impressed with the logistics of the visit – which I learned later were organized and created with North Korean technology. Upon arrival you received a photo id, paid for the number of days’ access you wanted and the type of transport you planned to use. There were several choices from moto-taxis to tuk tuks to jeepney-type vehicles circulating throughout the complex.

In addition to Angkor Wat the Park contains more than fifty Hindu and Buddhist temples from the 9th to the 15th C. The stone structures are all that remain of this city originally built of wood.





Siem Reap is located near Tonlé Sap Lake, southeast Asia’s largest fresh water lake, home to about 170 floating villages. All components of village life – houses, shops, churches, schools and temples, are structures floating on foundations comprised of barrels and bamboo. Transport is strictly by boat. We had arranged for our group to tour Chong

Kneas village and we made a donation to the school that we visited.



Some of us stayed an extra night and took the opportunity to visit Artisans d’Angkor workshops where artisans were trained in traditional Cambodian handicrafts. There is a silk farm which includes the entire process from mulberry tree plantation, through incubation of cocoons to

spinning of silk and weaving. And, although I had visited such a farm in the Philippines it was interesting to experience it again.



One of the crafts was silk painting (similar to Sri Lanka) and I bought a couple of pillow covers from their beautiful boutique (also accessible online at www.artisansdangkor.com).



The very thin silk scarves embroidered with tiny flowers were available in a wide range of colors (even more than in this photo) and I bought every color for future gifts. A bud vase completed my purchases.



Siem Reap's artisan and evening markets were lively and worth a visit.

One evening we enjoyed a traditional Khmer dinner and Apsaras dance show.



Traveling in Cambodia also had its very sad element. De-mining operations were still active throughout the country and we very frequently saw people who were missing limbs.



The Khmer traditional music on this CD is performed by a band comprised of crippled musicians.

I only learned upon returning home to Bangkok of one of Cambodia’s other specialties at the time. I paid for my extra hotel room night with a US\$100 bill and received a US\$50 bill in exchange which turned out to be counterfeit! At that time Cambodia (not alone among southeast Asian countries) was producing literally millions of dollars of very sophisticated counterfeit U.S. currency annually, the US\$ being the preferred “hard” currency of southeast Asia.

Although I would visit China in 2009, I was not near the headwaters of the Mekong. Likewise, I would visit Burma/Myanmar in 2013, and although I visited indigenous tribes in Shan State in the Golden Triangle near where the Mekong forms the border between Burma and Laos, I have not actually encountered the Mekong River again after this trip.