

Eat, Pray, Move

Indochina Tour: Laos, Vietnam, and Cambodia



Left to Right: (top) Laos: Royal Palace grounds – door and naga detail; monk robes drying, Wat Xieng Thong funeral chamber statuary, market (middle) Laos alms-giving processional, Hmong girl; Vietnamese children, musician, Army Museum, bullet hole in Hue Citadel (bottom) Hue Royal Temple, Hoi An, Khmer dancers (real & stone), Cambodian girl, Phimeanakas Palace in Angkor complex

Introduction

For about 4 years, I have had the so-called Indochina tour on my mind – but short Christmas breaks have stood in the way, not to mention my fear – as a microbiologist - of visiting an area with tropical diseases. Peak season for visiting Indochina is December-January because this represents the dry/cooler season - important not only for the experience but also because there are fewer mosquitoes (which can carry malaria, dengue, Japanese encephalitis), and there are fewer leeches (which do not carry diseases but are gross). Anyway, this year the magic “7-year holiday break” arrived – when, because of how New Years Day falls, we get a whole month off. And so I booked this trip with Wilderness Travel (WT), with whom I have done 5 other trips. I chose their version over other options because it seemed the most comprehensive. Unfortunately, one drawback of this trip is that it requires a LOT of traveling (consider that I took off or landed in planes 24 times during this trip, spending ~40 hours in airports, likewise in buses... hence the “move” part of the title). In general, half my friends understood why I was interested in this trip but the other half seemed surprised I would want to do something fundamentally “cultural.” Over the years, many things have spurred my interest in specific aspects of this trip. In terms of Cambodia: (1) I was first exposed to Angkor Wat via a classmate in highschool (Jon Abels), who did a moving presentation about this amazing site – and this was definitely the primary draw to this part of the world; (2) Ellen’s visit to Angkor Wat a few years ago cemented the idea that I had to see this place for real – even though she caught something *Shigella*-like (i.e. 15-20 diarrhea movements in one day) in Siem Reap; (3) Seeing The Killing Fields as an impressionable teenager was also very powerful, and even though we did not visit Phnom Penh during this trip, I knew we’d see/feel this aspect of Cambodian history. In terms of Luang Prabang/Laos: (1) Well, that’s largely the fault of Anthony Bourdain, whose shockingly serious presentation of Laos and his obvious love for THAT country is hard to argue with; (2) But I wouldn’t have bitten if I wasn’t SOOOOO drawn to the monk/Buddhism experience during my 1998 trip to Nepal – indeed, the cultural aspects of that trip frankly were more powerful than seeing the Himalayas... and that’s coming from a mountain person. As for Vietnam, I cannot say I was drawn to this country; in fact, a year before, Karen had loaned me a book (Catfish and Mandala) about a Vietnamese-American who returns to Vietnam – and my response to that book was negative: the land came across as ugly and polluted, the people aggressive and bigoted. Equally troubling: Ellen and I were enjoying a free breakfast at the Marriott in Bend, OR back in 2009 – reading some USA Today life/travel section cover story about Indochina... and this eavesdropping Vietnam vet sitting next to us at the bar leans over and proceeds to condemn all notions traveling to this part of the world because of THAT WAR. Of course, my knowledge of THAT WAR is limited and so, if anything, seeing Vietnam because of THAT WAR was probably my only curiosity – next to that, HIGH EXPECTATIONS of fabled Halong Bay. That this trip emphasized Vietnam (in fact: spending the majority of days there) admittedly concerned me given my definable interest in Laos (first on the trip itinerary) and Cambodia (last on the trip itinerary) – but I figured I would learn something new no matter what... and, being that I was on vacation, the worst thing that would happen would be boredom or getting sick.

As far as “getting sick” issues are concerned, I went into this trip more prepared than on ANY other trip – despite mixed messages from WT (e.g. staff insisted malaria was not an issue, while trip literature was very clear: bring and use antimalarial drugs). I even paid to consult with an infectious disease travel medicine doctor. Given my travel history, all my immunizations were up to speed EXCEPT typhoid fever (which now involves an oral live/attenuated vaccine – this must be boosted every 5-10 years). I elected NOT to get vaccinated for Japanese encephalitis or rabies (the latter because it was pointed out to me that, regardless of vaccination status, a rapid animal bite would be a “trip-ending event”). Concerns about taking antimalarial drugs, though, remained a deal-breaking factor in all my planning, having watched my Ph.D. advisor (Julie) suffer horrible neurological side effects during a long research trip to Africa (specifically to mefloquine). Prior to any consideration of this trip, I also contacted Julie for an update on her experiences with antimalarial drugs – knowing that if things hadn’t improved for her, I was pulling the plug on this trip. In fact, Julie provided me with a complete rundown, EASILY identifying malarone as the best one. While Julie and I had no major side effects on malarone (save, in my case, a few vivid dreams), others on this trip claimed serious problems (mostly GI) with this drug – and stopped taking it midstream (although many were not – as recommended – taking the drug with meals). I also carried (but never used) Zithromax, a broad spectrum antibiotic, for diarrhea (my travel DR noting that fluoroquinolone drugs like Cipro DO NOT work well in Asia because said drugs have been overused in agriculture), and Tamiflu for influenza (being that most scary flu’s originate in SE Asia – where flu is a year-round problem). Of course, there are PLENTY of diseases you cannot bring specific drugs for and must simply avoid – the scariest being other mosquito-borne illnesses. Thus, I wore a permethrin-treated/insectical shirt pretty much all the time, in addition to long pants and hiking boots (with socks). I also carried a DEET-based cream and a full-body bug-suit, neither of which saw much use... appropriate payback given ALL the mosquito problems I faced on hiking trips this last summer. And of course, the other “avoidance” diseases involved food- or water-borne GI illness. Even though all our hotels were very high-end, we were not allowed to drink (or brush our teeth with) ANY tap water from ANY hotel during this entire trip. Although tap water was not as bad as in Nepal (where it had a slight brown tint and often smelled like sewage), the water seemed most questionable in Laos and Halong Bay (Vietnam). Likely arranged via WT, all hotels provided pretty much unlimited bottled water – although I sometimes supplemented by buying bottled water on the street – which was very cheap. As for food, all but 3 meals during this trip were arranged by WT – and so we were at their mercy for choosing safe options. Nearly all meals included some form of fresh fruit or uncooked salad (neither of which are recommended to avoid prevalent microbial contamination). In the end, I (like most members of our party) ate most of the fruits and salads put before me. Nevertheless, I ultimately did question 2 company-selected meal options as I did develop GI distress twice on this trip. But more on that later, sufficed to say I was successful on the respiratory and mosquito-borne illness front... but NOT on the GI illness front (hence another variation on the “move” part of the title).

December 13-16, 2011: Portland to Bangkok

Given early flights, I headed up to my usual airport hotel on December 13 (with Bryan providing part of that transportation) and then took off early the next morning. First, it was a short flight to Seattle, followed by a 2-hour layover, and then the BIG (10.5 hours) one to Narita/Tokyo, Japan. Anyone considering SE Asia needs to know upfront that, while land costs in all these countries is sort of inexpensive, the airfare is INSANE (easily, the most expensive flights I’ve swallowed). My total airfare for this trip (including internal flights booked by WT) was about \$3500, although I knocked \$2000 off using my credit card rewards program. Airfare included, as previously stated, TWELVE flights. Believe it or not, I considered my flying price tag a bargain – largely because I saved a lot by booking a round trip ticket to Bangkok, and then buying separate one-way tickets for other legs of the trip (e.g. Bangkok to Luang Prabang at the start of the trip, and Siem Reap back to Bangkok at the end of the trip) through smaller carriers. Indeed, trying to book giant one giant flight package resulted in ticket price estimates that were \$6000 (or MORE). Of course, there were some drawbacks to my approach: (1) paying for hotels and extra meals in Bangkok, which I did for 3 nights; and (2) waiting in all the lines (ticketing, customs, security) again because you had to leave (and then re-enter) the Bangkok airport. While I felt the benefits of sleeping in Bangkok outweighed the drawbacks during the arrival portion of this trip, I would fly directly out of Siem Reap and start heading home immediately were I to do this trip again; indeed – Korean Air has direct flights out of Siem Reap to Seoul (and beyond) that entirely bypass Bangkok. Incidentally, my major flights were United; minor flights were Bangkok Air, Laos Air, Vietnam Air, and Angkor Air.

But I digress. My last (and only previous) flight over the entire Pacific was in 1998 (to Nepal), heralded by the following introduction from my seat neighbor (a 70-something jazz musician): “Well, we’re gonna be sitting here for the next 10 hours - you better tell me about your love life.” This time, my seat neighbor was a friendly Chinese-American software engineer embarking on a long holiday in Singapore and Bali. The night before, I took the opportunity to upgrade my seats – spending \$300 for “economy plus,” which (on this flight) meant EXCELLENT bulkhead seats. Although I dozed off an hour or two, most of this flight was spent eating, looking out the window (views included the Alaska Range/Denali, as well as Fuji), and watching movies, including The Way and Contagion (which I probably should NOT have watched given where I was going and concerns about infectious disease). Although most of the flight was quiet, we hit turbulence as we flew over the Sea of Okhotsk (between Kamchatka and Siberia) – although, amazingly, 2 other HUGE jets appeared here, paralleling our flight pattern until Honshu. Not surprisingly, we circled Narita/Tokyo 30 minutes – the LAST to land in a long line... and worrisome because my layover/ground time was only 90 minutes. By the time we landed, lined up for, and eventually cleared this big security clusterfuck, it was 5:30 AND my next flight had been moved up 20 minutes – meaning that I immediately boarded what was a 7.5 hour flight to Bangkok. At the time, I was crabby, exhausted, hungry, and NOT in the mood to deal with anymore flying; I also thought my “economy plus” purchase applied to this flight as well – but NO, I was in the back of the plane with very little room and a blurry mess of people everywhere. Miraculously, though, the middle seat (I was window and little grunge dude was aisle) was EMPTY. Praise Jebus. Unfortunately, we were grounded for 45 minutes, my mind in a tailspin about how fucked up I was going to be landing in Bangkok at what was looking like 1 a.m. Fortunately, the flight staff served dinner immediately after take-off and hit the lights; I fell asleep almost immediately – and slept a good 4 hours (a possible record in my personal flying history). Amazingly, we landed in Bangkok at midnight (only 15 minutes later than planned). In contrast with my last Bangkok experience (again - Nepal), I was not puking with food poisoning (acquired from airplane food – most likely: bad slaw). The airport was also new and swank. Customs and baggage pick-up seemed effortless and rapid. In contrast with (and because of) the 1998 trip, I KNEW I had to schedule an overnight (minimum) rest stop here – and I’m glad I did it... it was one of the best decisions about this whole trip. Specifically, I booked 2 nights at the Novotel Airport hotel (sorry – no pictures from this leg!) – a 10-minute shuttle ride away. By 1 a.m., I was showered and in bed. As stated to my friends/family, the Novotel provided EVERYTHING I needed to recuperate: great, quiet rooms with lots of American/European cable stations, an awesome fitness center (free), a lovely pool (free), all

kinds of dining/food-court options (reasonably priced), and a business center (so-so, and it was not that cheap). My one full down day at the Novotel felt like 3 days of relaxation, making me wonder whether I should someday vacation at a resort for no apparent reason other than those amenities. It should also be noted that Bangkok (and southern Vietnam) were in the middle of a heatwave; at the time we landed (remember – midnight), it was still 85°F, with daytime averages in the 100's. The next morning (notably misty), I enjoyed a continental breakfast (my favorite during this whole trip, as it featured both western and eastern fare – including all kinds of unusual fruits), running/treadmilling, a Japanese fare lunch (SUPERB), a nap, a swim, and a Thai fare dinner (I've had better), and sent/checked email. The only things I could have done without were: (1) the obese German family who made me work extra hard on the treadmill – as the fitness center looked out over the pool; and (2) the fit old French dude in the speedo with his all-service Thai girl (EASILY 40 years younger); initially, I thought they were grandfather and granddaughter – but then I overheard some giggling about how he was her favorite customer, right before they started making out under the beach towels. Oh well – they don't call it Bangkok for nothing. Being that I had a sort-of early flight the next day, I retired early – wishing I had thought to come even earlier. Indeed, were I to do any trips via Bangkok again, I would DEFINITELY book 2 full days to rest up even more.



Left to Right: (top) Mekong near and at Luang Prabang, Nam Khan river that flows through Luang Prabang and into the Mekong, our plane; (bottom) airport, ENTIRE baggage claim area, Lao flags, first stop in town – “Scandinavian” Bakery

December 17, 2011: Bangkok to Luang Prabang, Laos

This morning's flight to Luang Prabang was something I had to arrange in advance of the trip. As stated, it was obscenely expensive to book entire trips to Laos (e.g. Portland to Seattle to Narita to Bangkok to Laos) using the usual on-line vendors. As recommended by WT, I booked this (and my return flight from Siem Reap) through Bangkok Air's website. Returning to the Bangkok airport was a rude awakening after 36 hours of peace. Waiting in the long and crazy ticket line, I yacked to a well-dressed Russian woman on some all-Thailand tour who claimed to not even know there was a country called Laos. After clearing the ticket line, I had to wait in another even slower customs line – being that I was now leaving Thailand. Fortunately, the customs bottleneck meant the security line was nil – and, beyond that, the airport was almost serene. Much to my surprise, I found a bank of free computers with internet – and did some work-related email follow-up. Down in the final gate area, I was surprised – as I was MANY times on this trip and in ALL countries I visited – with how many families/little kids (even toddlers and babies) were traveling... most European (French) or Australian. That parents would risk malaria (or other things) seemed shocking to me – although I have yet to research whether drugs like malarone can be dosed out to such young kids. At any time, too, there were TONS of Japanese, Chinese, and Korean tourists – with countries like Vietnam and Cambodia being shockingly proactive about catering to these specific groups. Of course, the stated boarding time came and went – the ultimate delay lasting 45 minute. And then, without warning, the flight crew showed up and we were heading out to a bus, driving WAY out to the plane, and finally on board. Indeed, as aptly stated by members of our group: NO flights between destinations in SE Asia were EVER on time. The plane we flew was the same kind that I fly between Seattle and Bozeman: a 35-ish row (2+2 seating configuration) prop plane... ALL seats full. Although my seat neighbor was a 30-something Japanese tourist traveling with his father and several friends (spread throughout the plane), Luang Prabang seemed to have the most Caucasian tourists (relative to Vietnam and Cambodia). During our 90-minute flight time, we were given an interesting box breakfast, parts of which I avoided. Initially, our views were of flat, waterlogged land (causing me to wonder whether this was typical or a byproduct of the recent Mekong flooding). After an hour, we started flying over more mountainous terrain – the peaks never more than 5000 feet high (if that). Most of the land looked green and forested – with occasional clear-cuts and some limestone outcropping. We also began flying over the Mekong, which looked very brown – the beaches and banks low (because, as stated, we were now in the dry season). Within 10 minutes of landing, we began flying over neat vegetable farms – and then directly over Luang Prabang proper. From the air, the city (population ~26,000) looked inviting and tropical – lots of banana trees interspersed with low, colorful buildings. Landing around noon, we disembarked on the tarmac under warm blue skies – hazy profiles of interesting mountains circling the skyline. Being that I had procured all my visas (required for Laos, Vietnam, and Cambodia) before this trip, I bypassed said line and entered the tiny baggage area. Outside, WT was waiting with the van – ready to whisk me and one other group member to our hotel (10 minutes away). Although Laos was the least aggressive in terms of trying to sell you stuff, there was still the usual throng of taxi and hotel vendors waiting outside the airport. Making our way to our hotel, we passed through parts of Luang Prabang that were significantly more run-down than the area where tourism is concentrated (specifically: this peninsula between the Mekong and the Nam Khan). Having said

that, and knowing how relatively poor both Laos and Cambodia are, I have to say upfront that I don't think I was shocked or upset by any living conditions nearly as much as during my trip to Nepal... although I don't know what that means (was Nepal that much worse, or am I that much more jaded?). Indeed, I was probably most shocked at how fresh the air smelled in Luang Prabang; unlike Nepal (its raw sewage rivers, its rotting food/meat overtones), Luang Prabang – and the Mekong – seemed and smelled almost pristine.



Left to Right: hotel main building, room, bathroom, fresh sausages (not as good as they looked), pretty doors, my lunch

Luang Prabang (UNESCO World Heritage site – which they are VERY proud of) has a number of historic French buildings/villas – not to mention several swank new construction projects along each of the riverfront streets in town. Our hotel was the Villa Santi, at the north end of the main shopping street (Sisavangvong). The main building housed the lobby and eating facilities, with rooms located across a side-street in a separate complex. Comparatively speaking, this hotel was just OK – although it should be noted that I suffered more room issues than other members of our group: e.g. insects, including ants and moths - the latter explaining why my room smelled of mothballs. At least 3 mosquitoes also got into my room over the 4 days we were there – which was unnerving because this region of Laos still has malaria. It was unclear whether the cleaning staff left the door open or whether the nearly 1 inch open space under the door was too blame (over time, I threw a bath towel over said space). And at night, there were some interesting sewage smells percolating from the bathroom. After checking in, meeting our primary guide (who said we'd be meeting at 6 for dinner), and unpacking, I hit the streets in search of an ATM, internet, and food. As was the case all days in Laos, the afternoon weather was warm and sunny (75-80°F). Heading down/south the main shopping street, I had a hard time finding a real ATM – and eventually succumbed to one of the money-changing stalls that aligned with a Lonely Planet-ordained place. The next sinful stop I HAD to make was at the nearby “Scandinavian” Bakery – which I had earmarked in my Lonely Planet. Although there were no outright Scandinavian pastries (or lelse – which would have been a TRUE miracle!), the stuff they had was DELICIOUS – especially the donuts (mine was a chocolate-covered with coconut). They also had excellent yogurt (which was hard to find in SE Asia – at least beyond hotel breakfast buffets). Regrettably, I did not photograph the eating bar area, which was adorned with Scandinavian troll figurines amidst metallic green Christmas tree garlands. Indeed – Christmas decorations were EVERYWHERE on this trip... and not solely to appease the tourists – especially in Vietnam, which is, like, 10% Catholic. After enjoying my lunch (a croissant, a donut, a yogurt, and a can of soda), I found my way to a nearby internet café and alerted friends/family I was safely in Laos; although the hotel had free Wi-Fi for folks carrying computers/tablets, the rest of us had to pay for internet (slow but cheap!) at one of only a couple options on the main drag.



Left to Right: bougainvillea lane, lantern store, Mekong boats, gardens near confluence of Mekong and Nam Khan, bamboo bridge

By the time I finished my tasks, I was feeling lazy but felt I should take a walk. Walking back towards the hotel, “bougainvillea” lane caught my eye – a narrow, colorful little side-street. Given that I had no bad vibes about this town (now or ever), I headed down – crossing the whole peninsula (a quarter of a mile – if that). En route, there were interesting stilt houses, a monastery, an art school, and a paper lantern shop (where I bought one of Luang Prabang's famous lanterns – used to alight the night market). Eventually, I came out on the last big road above the Mekong: Khem Khong. Some of the fancier villas and restaurants lined the town side of the road – with most of the land above the river annoyingly taken over by restaurant decks (i.e. you couldn't wander freely to look at the river through the palm trees). Also, several semi-aggressive boatmen hounded me along this street – asking me to pay for a Mekong tour in one of their colorful boats. Although the Laotians were not as aggressive as sales-people in Vietnam or Cambodia, I started growing my plate of cynical armor at that moment. Having said that, I passed a young man painting Luang Prabang's famous orange-clad monks with their shade umbrellas... and I am a sucker for that kind of thing. The only offensive filth in Luang Prabang lay along the riverside – where people threw trash down certain sections of hillside. Of course, they don't throw it everywhere – because most riverside land becomes public farm/garden space – with more plantings as the Mekong lowers. In general, the vegetable gardens in Laos were gorgeous, clean, and robust – something my farmer grandmother would have highly respected. As I neared the end of the peninsula, I came to the confluence with the Nam Khan. Here, you could pay 50 cents to cross the river on an annually constructed bamboo bridge – which looked like something out of a bad jungle movie. A woman in a shanty shack by the bridge took your toll – and I wasn't going to argue because crossing this bridge was not on our written itinerary (in fact, several folks were given the option to do this walk impromptu). Of course, I didn't know where the bridge went – but just going across was worth 50 cents... and the views were nice. At the other side, I hiked along a little trail – ultimately winding up at this viewpoint where another shanty snack-shack was being

run by a woman with several little girls. Being that it was hot and she had cheap cold sodas, I bought another snack and enjoyed it in the shade – views of the confluence and the pretty vegetable garden terraces up the banks. As I was returning, umbrella-wielding monks were coming up the trail... but, as usual (i.e. as in Nepal), I felt awkward photographing them in this situation. Thankfully, I would get over that at times on this trip – albeit mostly guide-facilitated. More on this issue later – as taking pictures of the locals was a big theme throughout this trip, not to mention a major point of argument with Ellen over the bridge, I continued around the tip of the peninsula, walking south/up the Kingkitsarat road that was immediately adjacent to the Nam Khan. As with the road above/along the Mekong, most of the land by the river was occupied by restaurant decking and gardens; but it didn't feel as crazy because no boat guys were hounding you. Eventually, I cut 1 block in, arriving back at my hotel, where I showered and laid down for a nap. As learned just after falling asleep, however: every day at 4 the monks from the monastery across the street went out and beat the hell out of this giant Taiko-like drum for 20 minutes. Although I did finally get out of bed and walk over there to watch/listen, the drum was in this shaded area that was hard to photograph. Returning at 4:30, I did get in over an hour of napping – ultimately arriving late to the 6 p.m. cocktail hour. Tonight's dinner was good and reasonably sized, featuring a big lazy Susan of different things to choose from – with dishes (3 cooked and 1 cold) containing fish, pork, chicken, and vegetables. In general, some variation of a cold salad made of thinly sliced green papaya or banana flower were served in all countries. Although I (a non-fish person) always had plenty to eat because meat/poultry were abundant, I'm not sure our lone vegetarian was well-nourished... given how little tofu was eaten in these particular countries. Dinners usually were eaten at 7 (late for my tastes), and over by 9 (my typical bedtime). Although our dinner situation began promising, it did grow a little old and frustrating over time (which I will no-doubt discuss more later).



Left to Right: Laotian guide, neighboring monastery – robes/living quarters/satellite dish, temple, door & pavement detail, offerings

December 18, 2011: Temples, Temples, Temples... Templed Out

Nearly all breakfasts on this trip were hotel-provided continental meals, with buffets featuring both Asian and western foods. I was highly satisfied with all breakfasts because I could enjoy what I wanted, in the portion size I wanted – AND pretty much all the places had some kind of yogurt. Of course, the weather dictated that we had to be ready to go between 8 and 8:30 a.m. most mornings (i.e. breakfast at 7). As with all days in Laos, it began soaked in and cold (upper 40's) – but, by 10, it was sunny and warm. Primarily lead by our local Laotian guide, today was devoted to a walking tour of key temples in town. Unfortunately, I swear there are HUNDREDS of monasteries/temples in Luang Prabang (that's an overstatement – but there are a LOT... given that ~700 monks live in the vicinity) – and only 3 that we visited are fully detailed on my Lonely Planet map. The first temple we visited – our neighbor across the street – is not even labeled on said map. Each temple complex consists of 1 or more ornate temples (some of which you could enter – this one we did not), several lesser temples or prayer-related structures, and living quarters. Interestingly, several monks we saw at different times during this trip were carrying/using cell phones and digital cameras. Sadly, the BEST monk shot I did NOT get was the guy in his full robes AND pink, fuzzy bunny slippers (with actual bunny faces on the fronts). Anyway, we made our way through our neighbor's temple complex; in my opinion, most of the monks generally darted away (or closed the living quarter doors or curtains) when they saw tourists coming – indicative of the fact that even though Luang Prabang was the LEAST tourist-infested... of all the places we visited, there is tourist/camera fatigue. After this trip, Ellen and I would greatly debate whether tourists are fundamentally changing the culture here – something our local guide strongly insisted was not the case. But I would disagree – in the sense that I saw evidence of both tourist fatigue but also something more insidious: some of the more gregarious monks positively responding to the attention. Keep in mind that monkhood in Laos is most often a short-term life experience that boys (some as young as 10) participate in – and some of these boys are clearly being influenced by the attention, in both Ellen and my opinion.



Left to Right: common carrying method, dried goods being made, other items for sale

We then continued down/north, winding up at the most famous temple in town: Wat Xieng Thong. En route, we walked a smaller street without a lot of traffic – and with more local dwellings and shops. A fair number of locals were out: women carrying goods via the classic double-basket, a family making this starchy dough product that, I believe, was cassava. After flattening, the discs were air-dried into crisp rounds that tasted mildly sweet. Within 10 minutes, we arrived at the large Wat Xieng Thong complex. Although we were early, sales-people were already setting up their booths, approaching us with postcards, temple offerings, etc. The Wat Xieng Thong complex was built in 1560, but heavily refurbished in the 1960's (I believe using a fair bit of Japanese money and Italian glass). Indeed,

most structures were all ornamented with colorful inlaid glass pseudo-mosaics depicting animals, people, religious activities, etc. We went into the largest structure/main temple – the sim, Luang Prabang’s signature style: complex roof layering that swoops down almost to the ground. Most Lao temples reminded me of Norwegian stave churches – right down to the dragonheads adorning the rooftops and tips. As with all temple visits, you had to take your shoes off, you couldn’t be wearing short shorts, and you had to be wearing a shirt with sleeves (no casual wraps – and, yes, we saw this enforced twice during this trip... in Laos and Cambodia). The insides of most temples contained some kind of large Buddha and, as I discovered, were hard to photograph (even with the big camera!). Across from the sim was the royal funeral chamber – its gold exterior depicting “erotic episodes from the Ramayana” (Lonely Planet). A repeated figure throughout this trip, the 7-headed snake (naga) provided the theme for the funeral chariot. I believe the naga figured prominently in Buddha’s enlightenment (as figures of the Buddha seated under a 7-headed snake were common). Indeed, snakes adorned the entrances or walkways of most temples we saw in Laos and Cambodia... although I cannot recall as many in Vietnam.



Left to Right: (top) Wat Xieng Thong – sim, glass detail, interior; (bottom) royal funeral chamber – naga chariot, urns, gilded door erotica; rental bikes along Nam Khan

Anyway – we continued down to the northern tip of the peninsula where I’d walked previously, following the same route back up the Nam Khan back to the hotel. We had a little time before heading to lunch on foot – at a local Lao place a few blocks away. In general, lunches (and dinners) were unnecessary big productions that each ate upwards of 2 hours. Although highly serviced multi-course meals were nice, satisfying, and novel for the first 5-6 days, they honestly became challenging marathons over time – with TONS of food thrown out because, by the end, we were BEYOND stuffed/NOT hungry; indeed, many of us would have traded at least 2 eating hours per day for more activities (“active” being the key craving). Following lunch, we walked through another monastery complex (again – NOT labeled on my map). In addition to a fancy central temple featuring lots of paintings showing the life of Buddha, this complex trained monks in basic artisan skills like making and painting statues.



Left to Right: post-lunch artisan temple workshop and main temple with ornate doors, Buddha paintings, Steve Taylor old-Buddha

We then continued to the Royal Palace Museum (Ho Kham), heralded by the newest temple in town - which featured lots of red and gold. Touring the former involved the strictest soldier-level surveillance we experienced in otherwise laid-back Laos. First, you had to turn in ALL belongings. But after snapping pictures all morning, many of us were relieved to be rid of our cameras for awhile. Second, all dress codes were enforced – and a couple of us (me included) were called out for too-casually tying our long-sleeved shirts around our waists. Nevertheless, the palace was crowded – with some unruly children/teenagers, which was ironic given how forceful the entrance surveillance was. I cannot say there was anything earth shattering to see. As with comparable palaces in Vietnam, I found it interesting how “modern” the scant royal bedrooms were – designed with minimalist and sort of Scandinavian furniture. As Americans, we were ashamed at the paltry gifts the US had given to Laos’ royalty over the years; we were DEFINITELY outdone by much of the rest of the world... although we did give them a car. Indeed, ALL royal and/or government facilities we visited seemed proud to display expensive and/or vintage cars. Following the museum, there was an optional “hike” up Luang Prabang’s highest point (Phu Si). Given the 400-step climb, a third of our group opted out, returning to the hotel. Given that the sun set around 5 p.m., this climb was meant to provide golden views over the city and distant mountains. Although the climb was a welcome work-out, a couple things got in the way

of a satisfying view: (1) too much foliage, and (2) the best mountains were straight into the sun and did not photograph well. We climbed up one stairway (with a little rest half way up by this bodi tree, said to be a graft from the original that the Buddha sat under) – and descended a different stairway - flanked by freshly painted naga handrails. The latter passed several additional temples, one featuring various statues of the Buddha, another featuring this little cave – by which there were bombshell flowerpots (i.e. made of war artillery). Near the bottom of the hill, we passed through another mystery monastery complex.



Left to Right: (top) Royal Palace Museum complex – temple and interior, entrance to the actual Royal Palace; (bottom) trash-can, climbing Phu Si, Ph Si views & temple, bombshell flowerpot, descending between snakes

And then it was back to the hotel – for a 2-hour rest/clean-up before our formal welcome dance/prayer ceremony and dinner. The latter, arranged just for our group, was held in this private area at the hotel. A local priest and a dozen or so older women presided, along with several young men/boys playing traditional instruments, and 4 teenage girls who danced traditional pieces wearing representative clothing from Laos' major ethnic groups. During the welcome prayer section, the priest did his thing - and then the women all lined up and tied 9 strands of white wool yarn around each of our wrists – assembly line style to music. Unlike everyone else, I am actually still wearing mine (well over half our group cut them off that night); glaring at my wrists over breakfast just this morning, Allison retorted, “Well – doesn't that make you look even more like a dirty hippie?” Following this hour-long ceremony, we walked a couple blocks to dinner - at the sort of famous L'Elephant, which featured French-European food. Thinking back now on our Laos experience, I will say that it's food was more varied than, say, Vietnam... where our greatest “food fatigue” seemed to gather.



Left to Right: in-motion dance, welcome prayer wrist-tying ceremony, some representative ethnic garb, dawn monks, tuk-tuk

December 19, 2011: Local Market, Up the Mekong, Close Encounters of the Stealthy Leech Kind

Aside from its UNESCO status, Luang Pragang is most famous for its daily/sunrise monk alms-giving processional – traditionally only done by locals who prepare some kind of rice offering, but more recently thronged by tourists who directly or indirectly participate. After seeing all the places we did on this trip, though, my impression is that the monk-alms processional is to Luang Prabang like the running of the bulls is to Pamplona: each of these events takes place (or has taken place) in many regional villages but – for various reasons (Hemingway in the case of Pamplona), it has become famous, enlarged, and associated with a specific place. Anyway - our original itinerary had us getting up before dawn to hand out sticky rice this morning – but, given a change/delay in tomorrow's flight, this would wait until the next morning. Regardless, the monk procession began every day at first light (~6:40 a.m. this time of year) and several members of our group (myself excluded) had already been getting up to watch and/or photograph the event. Given jetlag, though, I was up at 6 a.m. this morning – and decided to head to breakfast, which not only began at 6:30 a.m. but also was in this upstairs room that overlooked a portion of the processional. Of course, I felt guilty eating a delicious egg and fluffy French pastries while watching hundreds of monks silently gathering finger-fulls of sticky rice... but that was not why I sort of burst out in tears when they first appeared; indeed, I did that in Nepal a few times when I first saw impressive Buddhist religious structures. Like I said in that report, I don't know if that means I'm a Buddhist – but I remain unattached to any religion, and plan to stay that way. In any event, I will discuss tomorrow's alms-giving experience in more detail tomorrow. Instead of alms-giving today, we added on a visit to Luang Prabang's impressive food market – departing via tuk-tuk at 8 a.m. Said market begins just beyond the Royal Palace Museum and encompasses

several blocks down one narrow street. While most booths are food, there are increasing trinket stalls – reflecting the fact that tourists (and their cameras) represent an increasing presence at this otherwise pristine daily-life event. While I could devote a long paragraph to observations during this hour-long slow-walk, I will let the following pictures (the best of my ~120 shots!) below speak for my impressions – adding only that I found my “Laotian grandma” among the crowd and you will recognize her in the beautiful blue wrap.



All: Luang Prabang market – fruits, vegetables, eggs, meat, poultry (Avian flu?), hooves, fish, noodles, rice, silk...

After the market, we walked back to the hotel and, after a short break to gather things for our LONG Mekong daytrip, we walked down to the river where our boat awaited. Going into this trip, I thought we were going to be traveling by boat for an hour; in fact (because we were heading UP-river), we took 2-3 hours UP (and 90 minutes down/with the current). As stated earlier, I was MOST happy that this section of the Mekong (despite its brown appearance) was not obviously polluted or stinky. As also stated, the rivers were all low – in comparison with their flood-stage levels a few months before. Initially, I thought that all the jungles along the Mekong represented fairly pristine entities. In fact, however, these forests were decimated during the French colonial years (to the point all native birds were severely reduced) – and remain highly impacted by tree/teak farming. Laos’ historic poverty also dictated that “anything that moves” in the jungle was edible – hence, remaining birds were further decimated to the point there is no birdlife to speak of in Laos. While the poverty situation does seem to be improving, illegal logging continues – primarily along the southern bank (and south to Thailand) – in large part because of Chinese demand. Thin jungles along the northern bank of the Mekong barely hide the fact that there is a full-on road just-inland – with regular villages interspersed and increasing (one we did NOT visit was the so-called “whisky village” – which fits into the theme of what I am about to say). Indeed, it is just a matter of time before this area becomes destroyed. Case in point: south of Luang Prabang (but before Vientiane) lies the hedonistic city of Vang Vieng – which has cultivated an international reputation for “tubing” (yes – redneck inner-tube floating, usually in some state of drunkenness... if not outright drugs)... and now attracts that kind of tourist in ABUNDANCE (in fact, I saw several recent visitors – all sporting tubing T-shirts – in line at the Bangkok airport). My point: much of Laos is near some tipping point of letting many of its beautiful places turn into THAT kind of place.

Our destination on the upriver Mekong trip was the area including and around Pak Ou Caves. Near the caves were excellent views of this skyline of dragon-backed mountains, as well as limestone cliff faces descending to the waterline. Across the river (on the highway side) from the caves was the tiny village of Ban Pak Ou (along the Mekong tributary called Nam Ou). We arrived at the caves around 12:30 and, given that our guides felt they were surprisingly quiet, we parked and climbed the steep stairwell to the large open cave face. Given the high water line of the Mekong, it seemed to me that much of this cave owed its existence to flooding, namely: very forceful water entering the limestone every so often. In contrast with other real caves we visited later, there were no real stalactite/mite formations. Having said that, there were a LOT of Buddha statues left by people (some serious/traditional, some kitschy day-glow colors with glitter) and so if this place really gets flood-cleaned out every so often, then a LOT of people must replace the statuary. We descended to our boat and crossed the Mekong to this BIG sandy beach – the aforementioned village hidden behind a wall of jungle. My mind has faded a bit but I want to say that Ban Pak Ou was home to a couple hundred people. Clearly used to our guide (and tourists), the village children (at least the under 12 portion) ALL seemed to greet us. In what remains somewhat controversial and/or uncomfortable to a few of us, our local guide handed out candy after leading them through a clearly repeated song. I suppose I would

have felt weirder or worse had the village not seemed happy and comfortable. Indeed, there seemed to be sufficient food (some live and running around) and clothing (including lots of western logos), good stilt houses, new construction, and satellite dishes aplenty. Having said that, it was a Monday afternoon (not even 2 p.m.) and no one was in school... not that we saw a school. As would be FAR more evident in Vietnam, education was CLEARLY a far more respected and prioritized activity there.



Left to Right: (top) Luang Prabang boatramp, dragon-backed limestone mountain views, high-water marker, limestone cliffs across from caves, cave parking area; (bottom) statues in the cave, across from caves, village children and typical home

After a short walk to talk about lowland village life in Laos, we walked down this jungle path to this deck viewpoint overlooking the Nam Ou; here, our boat crew had set up an impressive lunch spread: multiple courses of hot and cold food, ice cold beer and soda. As was evident, kayaking is now possible on the Nam Ou (i.e. driving from Luang Prabang and then floating 3 hours down to the Mekong). Indeed, the Lonely Planet indicated that driving to this area was faster and cheaper than a boat trip... but probably not as relaxing or scenic (particularly given the huge size of our boat, the restrooms and snacks, and the massage services – available for an additional fee). After lunch, we hiked down to our boat and motored back to near Luang Prabang – stopping a little upriver at this artisan village (Ban Phanom) devoted to paper-making and weaving (including raising silkworms and preparing thread). Clearly benefiting from a lot of interest (e.g. artisans were preparing a HUGE order for some New York wedding planners), Ban Phanom seemed really developed and prosperous. Following a tour of all the facilities, I dropped some cash here – both because the woven products were really nice, and the facilities clearly employed and improved the lives of a lot of women.



Left to Right: (top) jungle hike, Nam Ou lunch views, our boat on Mekong; (bottom) Ban Phanom – paper-making, weaving, silk production; evidence of the stealthy leech!

For our return, we were given the option of riding back in a van or walking back via the aforementioned bamboo bridge. Given that it was hot and I'd done the bridge already, I took the easy way back so I could enjoy and shower and nap. Unfortunately, I quickly discovered a weird problem: a tiny oval "bite" on my inner right ankle that was bleeding... and didn't stop bleeding for 2.5 hours.

Indeed, the band-aid shown above had already been changed 3 times over 45 minutes. Needless to say, the idea of a leech bite crossed my mind immediately – which was both good and freaky: good because I knew leeches did not carry any scary diseases; freaky because – well – that was freaky. Of course, then I began to wonder if it was, like, still in my sock or boot. So I nervously reached into my inside-out sock and then into my boot (even removing the liners) – worried I was going to find some slimy beast laying in wait. While the culprit was long-gone, a significant amount of blood stained both my sock and boot. Now – I know some folks are skeptical that a leech biting through a sock seems unlikely... and I thought that too until I told the story to a colleague – only to learn that he had the SAME thing happen to him in India AND found the finger-sized leech. Where the leech came from is also a question - but there were plenty of weird things at the market, at the caves, and during the jungle hike. Although our main guide agrees it was a leech, he felt the lowland jungle was so dry and such an encounter during the dry season was unprecedented. And so my stealthy leech will remain a mystery. As for the remainder of the evening, we went to dinner at a mixed-menu place around 7. There, I enjoyed spaghetti and ice cream – as western lunch and dinner options were about to vanish for some time. But the conversation around the table, needless to say, was mostly about Sarah's (a.k.a. leech girl's) wound. Given a now-pounding headache (because questions about the wound – like “what if it's something else... something scary and trip-ending” – were stressing me out) and the need to get up REALLY early for the monk alms-giving processional, I retired early and slept well (courtesy of Advil and Benedryl).



Left to Right: sticky rice, heading down main street, returning up back street, locals giving alms

December 20, 2011: Pre-Form Your Balls, Monks, Hilltribes, and Late Flights to Hanoi

I forget where I saw the sign – but I didn't have my camera on me at the time. Paraphrased, the sign regarded all kinds of rules that tourists were supposed to follow during the daily/sunrise monk alms-giving processional. Key things included: silence, never handing food directly to monks (it was placed in their pots – but only if open), not touching monks in any way (especially women), positioning yourself below (i.e. sitting or kneeling) the monks if you were close, handling food in a sanitary manner (i.e. washing your hands), choosing appropriate and quality food. Although there wasn't a specific mention of taking off your shoes – Ellen noticed that most people giving alms took their shoes off (where our group did not... although we did our best to respect all other rules). Our group was assembled at 6:30 a.m., seated in chairs along the sidewalk where the monks walked. We were each provided with traditional baskets of sticky rice – and handi-wipes. Unfortunately, most of us were hounded by local women selling rice products as we made our way from our room to the main street; I barely emerged when 2 women – arms full of banana-leaf wrapped rice portions – ran towards me: “for the monks, for the monks...” and gave me the stink-eye when I refused to buy. So - this new monk/alms industry is DEFINITELY a tourist-induced change in Luang Prabang. Insofar as the alms-giving experience, I was not all emotional today – half because I'd just dished the rice-ladies, and half because I felt I had to stay focused on the task (challenging because they moved by VERY quickly). In retrospect, we gave away WAY too large rice-balls – and ran out after only 30-40 monks passed. Of course, I was the one who – while waiting – urged group members to “pre-form your balls.” Despite running out of rice early, it was a photographic blessing because it allowed me to take more pictures and move to the return line area (i.e. the monk processional came down the main street and then U-turned down by the Royal Palace area, and then came back up the smaller street one block behind the hotel). My best pictures were definitely along the back street/return area. Although Ellen was offended that westerners are – in any way – allowed to participate in this activity, I thought it was great – and the whole experience remains a highlight of this trip. Having said that, we definitely saw some bad western behavior. After the processional, we all made our way to breakfast and stuffed our faces on WAY more than sticky rice (and if I haven't said it: what the monks collect in that pot every morning is their food for the entire day).



Left to Right: mountain drive (note indigenous poinsettias on side of road), Hmong school, village, wood, garden

Today's big activity was to take a bus-ride up into the nearby mountains to visit 2 “ethnic minority” hillside tribe communities: the Hmong (secretly recruited by the CIA in the 1960's to stop the spread of communism) and Khamu. Setting out in the cool fog, we took a small open-air bus to the edge of town and then boarded a full-on bus for our 90-minute drive HIGH (at least 1000 feet) into the foggier hills. Immense ruts and red-mud stained foliage on either side of the jungle-surrounded dirt road spoke volumes of what it must be like during the rainy season. To this day, I have NO IDEA about the names of the villages we visited or where they are, which is sort of sad. Our first stop was the clearly-thriving Hmong village – owing to a LOT of tourism-related “donations” (which I assumed changed hands at some point between our local guide and a village leader). Indeed, the first sight as we walked through the gate was a school –

unfortunately, none of the kids were in school despite it being around 11 a.m. on Tuesday. We were then greeted by influxes of children – as we walked through the sprawling village (each house managing large plots of land/gardens and animals). The Hmong (whose relatives include groups from Southern China and Northern Vietnam) are known for their embroidery – which began as clothing adornment but has transmuted more into tourist products. Alas, most of the village garb seemed (as with the lowland Mekong village) to be western. The woman by the fire (below) allowed us to walk/look inside her home; in contrast with lowland stilt homes, Hmong homes were simple ground/dirt-floor huts (maybe 20X20 feet total). There was a fire circle but no obvious electricity or lights. The entire back wall was stacked with bags of rice – enough for a whole year, we were told. Hammock-style beds with mosquito nets were hung in partially-separated bamboo cubicles off to the side. Of course, my camera failed to take decent images thanks to the darkness. We continued walking into the central part of the village; by this point, about 20 children had arrived and – as before – they sang and received candy. We also visited the village’s rice-processing hut – where a man mechanically (using a fuel-powered engine) removed the white rice from the husk. Unfortunately, some of us stumbled onto what looked like a bad scene: little puppies on a dying fire (as they seemed to be as well). For the record: cooking/eating dog – we were told – was not something done in any of the places we visited. But there were a LOT of stray dogs everywhere (hmmmm - maybe should have gotten that rabies vaccine). Thus, I have no doubt that getting rid of too many puppy mouths to feeds happens, and that’s probably what we were seeing. Indeed, our grandmother drowned a few kittens in 1980-era urban Washington because, well, that’s the way she used to do it on the farm. Anyway, we continued to the nearby Khamu village; unfortunately, I had a hard time seeing many difference between these two places – other than: (1) Khamu lived WAY more closely together; (2) Khamu kids had some obvious toys – like the slingshot (below) and these one-wheeled bamboo sticks that they ran around with; and (3) the Khamu ran road-front stores – selling snacks, drinks, and cigarettes.



Left to Right: all but last are Hmong villagers; boy with slingshot is from nearby Khamu village

Returning to our hotel, we had a little time to clean up – and then walked to this riverside place above the Nam Khan for our last meal in Laos. Originally, we were to proceed straight to the airport but, given a 2-hour flight delay, we now had that much time to kill on our own after lunch. And so I repeated much of my first hours in Luang Prabang: shopping, internet, another donut at the Scandinavian Bakery... and then I donated all my spare change (about \$10) to this Lonely Planet-ordained literacy outreach place called Big Brother Mouse (indeed, if I haven’t said it: Laos is a communist nation). Big Brother Mouse ran a nice facility near the hotel and monies raised went to producing and providing books to children... an important undertaking given the lack of obvious schooling. Having said that, if education isn’t fundamentally valued (as it CLEARLY was in Vietnam), I’m not sure any donation will help. At 3 p.m., we made our way to the airport, encountering what our lead guide described as the worst traffic he’d seen in all his time guiding here. And things did not get any better once we arrived. Although our flight was sort of on time, ALL other flights were messed up. Given the small size of the airport, it was standing room only in the one-room gate area – the air stale and nasty, despite a lovely day outside. Fortunately, we were one of the only groups to escape, taking off by sunset on what was a 60-minute flight over the mountains and down into Hanoi.



Left to Right: leaving Laos, my only pictures of the real Hanoi Hilton, our INSANELY large bus, Hanoi street scenes

When we landed in Hanoi, it was dark. Customs was intimidating given how serious Vietnam is about having in-advance visas (and knowing that mine had a hand-written correction on it... LONG STORY). After that, baggage claim was a clusterfuck because a couple conveyer belts were broken and there was no clear communication system. The women’s room was also FOUL – the most memorable problem being that someone had peed INTO the Dyson hand-drying system. Even after our luggage emerged, we still had a one-hour bus ride to our downtown hotel (the real Hanoi Hilton). And so I watched fantasies of “nice dinner by 7:30” turn into “crabby dinner at 9:30.” Probably for better, tonight’s dinner was “on your own.” Probably for worse, I chose a room service bowl of chicken pho (Vietnam’s famous noodle soup). I say “worse” because I DEFINITELY tired of Asian food over the next 7 days. Should have gone with my first instinct: burger and fries... don’t know what I was thinking – other than: it’s been a LONG day and I need to go to bed.

December 21, 2011: Mostly Ancient Hanoi Sites

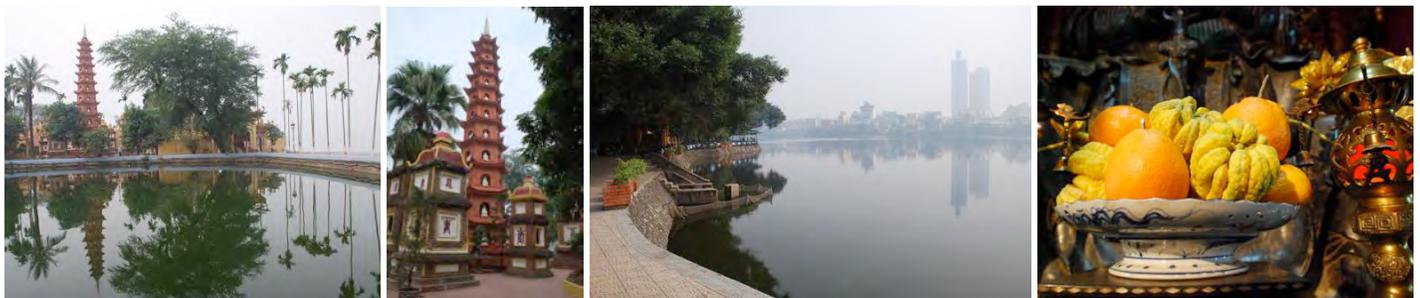
So – I’m going to begin the Vietnam section by admitting I wasn’t as excited by many areas we visited in Vietnam, but Hanoi (population ~6 million) was my favorite. There was something about the insane traffic and its rougher edges (relative to slicker and cleaner Saigon/Ho Chi Min City) that seemed more foreign and interesting. I also found the Ho Chi Min and war things (both visited tomorrow)

fascinating. The Hanoi Hilton was, in my opinion, the best hotel we stayed at during the guided portion of this trip (even though I took no pictures of my room). Waking up at 6:30 a.m., I ventured down to the AMAZING fitness center and worked out for 45 minutes – before thoroughly enjoying the excellent breakfast buffet. After fussing with bugs and fumes in Luang Prabang, I was SO happy to have a thoroughly clean room with breathable air. Having said that, Hanoi is getting a bad reputation for poor air quality (owing to MILLIONS of scooters); while it was something I was dreading (based on Lonely Planet descriptions), I can't say it bothered me a lot... although it did bother others in our group, and most locals wore fabric surgical style masks. Although the sky never cleared in Hanoi (remaining hazy white), it's hard to say how much was all pollution because there was a lot of misty fog – as a result of Hanoi's location in the Red River Delta. In general, Hanoi was colder than usual (we were told) – with lower 70's the usual midday temperature.



Left to Right: Confucian Temple of Literature (top) groundskeeper in traditional hat, main entrance gate, scholar memorials, me and soldier on holiday, school assembly; (bottom) possibly Confucius, music performance/traditional instruments, dragon paraphernalia

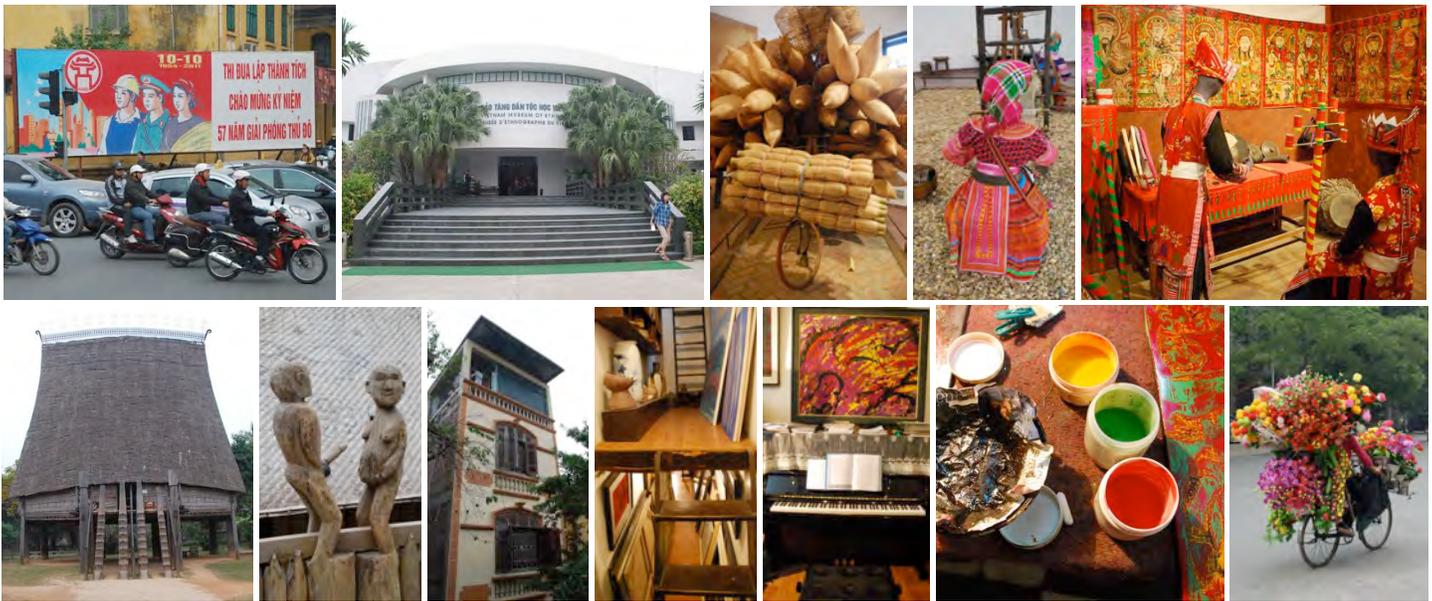
Today was focused on Hanoi's ancient sites – which I admittedly struggled with because, as with Laos, the temples started running together. Our first visit was the Confucian Temple of Literature (built in 1070), which honors the highest achieving scholars - and served as the most prestigious university for mandarins. This large site consists of several gated courtyards containing gardens, reflecting pools, and temples. Surrounding the largest reflecting pools are all these turtle statues – each memorializing a scholar (our new local guide referred to them as Ph.D.'s). As I sarcastically noted, it is no surprise they chose a turtle – given that that is the typical pace of Ph.D. progress. Of course, I then noticed a bunch of adorable young soldiers – several posing with old western women... and I asked our main guide about bugging them for a picture. OK – they are on holiday... BUT I was not allowed to do that if they were on duty. In the end, I was the only one in our group who did it – and I'll probably get some more crap added to whatever the CIA/FBI collects about me... or I will offend Vietnam veterans. Anyway, in the next courtyard a HUGE school field trip/assembly was taking place – all these little kids in uniforms, a band, flag-waving... it all felt VERY communist. And yet, after the lack of obvious education in Laos, I couldn't help but totally admire what I saw. In the last courtyard, we sat down to listen to a music performance using traditional Vietnamese instruments – most bamboo (e.g. a vertical marimba-like piece, and a horizontal thing that was played by clapping air into the tubes). We then visited the scenic Tran Quoc Pagoda, located on one of several large lakes within Hanoi (notably where McCain crashed), and then visiting the Quan Thanh Taoist Temple, which looked similar to things we'd seen earlier in the day. The former included a sign that read "SUGGEST ALL THE PEOPLE NO WEAR THE SHORT TO THE PAGODA."



Left to Right: Tran Quoc Pagoda and Truc Bach Lake, still life weird fruit offerings at the Quan Thanh Taoist Temple

Although Ellen had many critical things to say about this trip, she did respect that we were often taken to places where real people ate... as with today's lunch. Indeed, our local guide was VERY excited about cha ca – a catfish-like beast that thrives in the Red River and tastes very mild... which I know because I didn't want to totally offend him. After lunch, we drove to the Museum of Ethnology. Unfortunately, this is where I (and a few others) did start to annoy the local guide by wandering off – in my case, because I didn't want to listen to so much talking, AND because I knew there was a HUGE outdoor exhibit area that we were probably not going to get to at this rate (indeed, those who stuck with the guide did not). Comparatively describing Vietnam's many ethnic groups, the indoor exhibits focused on clothing and activities (using life-sized bamboo models), and the outdoor exhibits focused on larger structures (homes,

gardens, and boats) and active displays (including live artisans). Admittedly, I examined the indoor stuff in a cursory manner (most enjoying the clothing) and then went outside – most impressed by the HUGE stilt house (that you climbed a ladder to access), the live-action stuff (e.g. embroidery, pottery), the mystery-erotica statues, and the medicinal plant garden. We regrouped at the museum gift store and much money was spent on everything from scarves to water puppets.



Left to Right: (top) communist street-sign, Museum of Ethnology – entrance, bamboo bike display, ethnic garb; (bottom) more Museum of Ethnology - tall stilt house, erotica statues; lacquer artist's home - piano/art, paint; bike flower vender (Betsy's shot)

We then drove to this contemporary artist's home – added to the itinerary because previous clients apparently wanted more current art to be represented. While potentially suspicious (i.e. was someone earning commissions here?), the truth was: none of this art was realistically for sale... and the artist was genuinely more excited about showing us her home and studio. Indeed, I was most interested in just seeing how people lived in this crazy city. As shown above, most city dwellings (in Hanoi and beyond) were tall and skinny. A whole house like this in Hanoi ran ~\$200K – where a comparable one in the sticks was ~\$50K. Living quarters represented the upper ~3 stories, with businesses on the ground floor. There were simple ladder-stairs between the floors. After admiring her living room gallery, we climbed to her studio and she explained how she pigmented and applied lacquer plant resin to create her unique paintings. We then returned to the hotel for a 2-hour break - during which time I hit the streets with a couple others, my goal being a nearby bookstore. Earlier, we'd been instructed and then practiced crossing Hanoi's INSANE streets – so now was the real test. The general trick was to choose a small break in the traffic and then just step into the road – proceeding across the street calmly and with an even pace... knowing vehicles are coming at you and will adjust. We were told NOT to change strides/run mid-way across because that messed with the perceived flow. I can only describe Vietnamese drivers as very capable of gauging distant activities (other drivers, pedestrians) and compensating responses so that no one ever really stops or freaks out (like Americans do). As a pedestrian, I felt like a beginner skier in a sea of experts on a steep hill. They whiz by, but they know what they are doing to the point they can adjust themselves better than you can adjust yourself. In any event, we survived 4 hard crossings and 6 easy ones in the hour we were out – AND we found Bryan a great (and cheap) Vietnamese flower book AND a Vietnamese children's flower puzzle. After another hour of cleanup, we headed out (in the bus) for a GIANT Vietnamese dinner (where... I have NO idea!).



Left to Right: Ho Chi Min images & carving from Army Museum, Mausoleum – propaganda TV's, school children at stilt house

December 22, 2011: Mostly Modern Hanoi Sites

Near the end of last night's dinner, our main guide lectured us about how SERIOUS we had to be during our first/morning activity: visiting Ho Chi Min's Mausoleum. Although our group was generally well-behaved and mature, we (doctors, lawyers, academics, computer folks, and business people) sometimes made jokes or did our own thing. But, we were warned, if we did anything wrong today, soldiers would be involved. Needless to say, the first thing said soldiers did upon our arrival was take our cameras and bags (so there will be no pictures of Uncle Ho's embalmed corpse). There was a steady stream of visitors the whole time we were there – divided into subgroups that were ~40 in size. We were supposed to walk 2 by 2 (lock-step) – first down a long open square to the mausoleum proper, then up some stairs and inside. There, soldiers were positioned every 10 feet as you walked basically a U-shape around the room with the lit-up corpse. A couple members of our group were physically man-handled (for lack of a better word) for

minor offenses: not being lock-step with their neighbor, and attempting to walk with their arms/hands behind their back (the soldier physically took the man's arms and straightened each to his sides). Fortunately, no one violated the "no talking" rule; I cannot imagine what would have happened if a sound was uttered. Given all the scrutiny, I didn't have much time to ponder Ho... other than he did look fresh for having been dead so long. For some reason, I also assumed Ho looked like Mao – and was therefore surprised how skinny he was. But, as learned while touring the complex, Ho definitely cultivated a simple peasant persona. Indeed, the mausoleum part of the trip lasted ~20 minutes total – and then we were set free, notably into throngs of MORE SCHOOL CHILDREN. Of course, we never saw any of them in the mausoleum... they were just touring the grounds – visiting the official palace and supporting buildings, and – most importantly – walking through Ho's famously simple house: an upscale version of a stilt house, built along a lake (presumably natural, given Hanoi's many lakes). Strategically positioned around the grounds were these big-screen televisions blaring Ho propaganda, national events celebrating Ho, impassioned singers crooning about Ho, etc. The whole experience, honestly, was very psychedelic communist. Eventually, we all regrouped at the One-Pillar Pagoda, which the guides gushed about but I didn't find that interesting... and then we briefly examined the gift store area.



Left to Right: stilt house across lake, line around stilt house, stilt interior, One-Pillar Pagoda

Our next stop was the Army Museum, which catalogs Vietnam's military history in three stages: pre-French colonization, overthrowing the French, the American War (as they call it) – plus a very rah-rah building on the communist reconstruction. As with the Museum of Ethnology, I quickly left the group (as did some others) – much to the chagrin of our local guide. And also as with the Museum of Ethnology, a key draw was the extensive outdoor component of the museum – which the guided group never fully explored. Although I made some effort to go through the pre-French building, I entirely skipped the French building – and went straight for the American War section... which was utterly fascinating (although I'm sure it would offend some Americans). Indeed, toys and clothes found with/on American-killed infants and children were fully on display, catalogued in no uncertain terms (with English translations throughout). Fascinating dioramas of the underground village hide-outs/supply stations and jungle strategies were likewise full-on. And then there was all the stuff of "ours" that they captured: every seeming soldier-affiliated object fully laid out (including a fascinating military-issued statement all our soldiers carried – basically begging for mercy/safe return in all major languages)... and outside: planes, helicopters (including a giant Chinook and you can climb into), bombs, tanks... EVERYTHING, I swear. After the trip, Ellen and I heavily debated whether Americans have comparable displays; where I said no, she argued yes (e.g. the Enola Gay, replicas of bombs – often painted with bigoted and/or jingoistic sentiments/images).



Left to Right: Army Museum (top) outdoor display & sculpture, bombs, Chinook helicopter & cockpit; (bottom) victory-sealing Saigon tank, killed infant clothing, statement to be shown if captured, dioramas showing underground strategy, reconstruction efforts

Just when I thought I was done, I stumbled into another building devoted to post-war reconstruction; it was, as stated, very rah-rah... although there were a couple thoughtful modern art paintings depicting the somber suffering that comes with war. By this point, I couldn't look at any more war stuff (as the impact of knowing people died in a lot of these captured war-crafts had started to sink in) and so I found my way to the small outdoor snack and gift shop complex. Here, I got sucked into an "antique propaganda poster" store. Although I was really drawn to the fabulously colorful war-era posters (especially those featuring female Vietnamese soldiers full-on

carrying machine guns), I wasn't sure I wanted to get caught with any of that in my luggage on my way home. And then I found one of my great finds of this whole trip: a Vietnamese propaganda poster promoting women in science – lovely paintings of women with microscopes, women engaged in selective agricultural breeding. AWESOME. I then rewarded myself with a bag of potato chips and a soda, which I enjoyed while sitting in the shade of a captured American helicopter until the rest of my group appeared.



Left to Right: "Hanoi Hilton" or Maison Centrale – relief showing French imprisonment, McCain visiting POW area, final sculpture

Our next stop was at the so-called "Hanoi Hilton" – originally the Maison Centrale (by the French, who built and used it the longest – as a prison for Vietnamese), but now officially called the Hoa La Prison Museum. Originally MUCH larger, most of the complex was torn down for other city projects (given that much of Hanoi was bombed flat by the Americans) – but, probably for better, someone thought to keep the main entrance and several representative buildings intact. A great deal of well-done art wall reliefs have been made for and displayed in this museum, the most impressive of which is the final contemplative courtyard (above). Paralleling the Army Museum, one section was devoted to the French colonial period and another the American War period; there was also an area devoted to women prisoners. Thinking back now, it was interesting that only in the museum sections where Vietnamese people were imprisoned were there fairly graphic depictions (using life-sized statues) of typical conditions... most highly inhumane. In the American section, no attempt to accurately reproduce (or admit) how prisoners were physically held was made. Rather, there were many soldier artifacts – and, most disturbingly – a ton of "evidence" making the case for how well American POW's were treated (e.g. clearly staged images of Christmas dinner and religious services, Christmas artwork they created... propaganda to go along with it). I cannot recall if it was here or at the Army Museum – but we were also told that Ted Turner made a large donation when he was married to Jane Fonda so that the prominent pictures of her would be taken down. While Hanoi Jane was absent, the Vietnamese definitely used ALL kinds of American newsreels of protestors (especially women) as propaganda as well – and these images were displayed prominently here.



Left to Right: POW Christmas illustration, heading out on pedi-cabs, pedi-cab in front of opera house, street scenes from cab

Following lunch, we returned to the hotel – where we had a short break before heading out for what looked (on paper) like a goofy exercise: an hour-long pedi-cab ride through the old town and then down to the big lake. In fact, it was a surreal and unusually interesting experience, mostly because you are seated full-on in the front (just you) with the rider behind. You are low to the ground, and right there IN traffic. You have to fully accept everything I said earlier about Hanoi drivers/riders. Although I carried my camera, I took few pictures because the experience was more about just being there: hearing the sounds, smelling the sometimes off-putting odors, watching the weirdly self-orchestrating chaos. While some folks went on longer walks after the ride, I returned with several others, heading straight back because I felt some alone/down time in a hotel bathtub was warranted. Plus – tomorrow we were leaving Hanoi and, given my "many shopping," I had to get on top of the packing situation. Complicating matters even more, we had a fairly involved evening itinerary: an hour-long water puppet show (until 7:45) and then another long dinner. But I'm not going to waste much space on the water puppet show, sufficed to say that I would not recommend that or do it again. While it was slightly charming in its extreme simplicity, there was no mystery about how it was done... in fact, it came off as more clunky than anything. Indeed, my greatest source of entertainment was this MASSIVE line (minimum = 300, probably more) of Vietnamese Christians – ALL wearing asylum-style white tops and pants, the former emblazoned with JESUS in big red letters – all singing and parading around the big lake by the theatre. Jesus-Freak Communists? Is that even allowed? Who knew?

December 23-4, 2011: Too Much Junk at Halong Bay

The water puppet show was only the beginning of several days of underwhelming things – and this was unfortunate because I (and most group members) had SUCH high expectations for our overnight trip on Halong Bay (another UNESCO site). The first thing, of course, was getting to Halong Bay: a 5-ish hour bus-ride through sometimes boring, sometimes ugly terrain. Sure – there were plenty of sentimental rice paddies dotted with conical-hatted farmers plowing the muddy land using water buffalos (none of which could be captured well through bus windows, of course)... but there were always giant power towers and lines, ugly development somewhere. Making matters truly worse: this region is powered by GIANT coal plants – meaning that we passed several HUGE smokestacks and coal-blackened towns. After a couple hours, we did take a restroom break at this VERY tourist-oriented gift facility: the bus dropped us off at the restroom area, but then moved across the complex, forcing us to walk the warehouse gauntlet with EVERY imaginable gift

(e.g. lacquer, pottery, sculpture, embroidery, clothing, food...). While I did buy a small needlepoint and a pile of snacks (including bona fide Pringles), I was feeling the strain of what was a far more aggressive expectation in Vietnam regarding shopping. We arrived at the Halong City (population 200,000) waterfront loading area around 12:30. Although we could see the distant limestone formations in the murky distance, the weather was disappointingly gray... and this NEVER improved, meaning there will be NO CLEAR BLUE SKY pictures at any point in this report. But the most disconcerting thing: the INSANE number of tour boats (most Chinese "junk" replicas). As learned, ~200 overnight boats (each holding about 20 guests) are allowed in the bay EVERY NIGHT; an additional 300 daytrip boats (each holding upwards of 40 guests) head out EVERY DAY. And there are few places where overnights anchor – meaning everyone is crammed cheek to jowl into just a couple places (case in point: from our deck that evening, I could count 50 other junks at close range). For this reason, I make no apologies for calling Halong Bay an overrun shithole in emails home written after this portion of the trip was over. Weirdly, Ellen found my pictures charming – remarking almost sweetly: oh, it looks so Asian! GOOD LORD.



Left to Right: (top) coal plants & rice-fields, looking back on Halong City, motoring; (bottom) junk room, dining area, bar, still motoring

After taking a skiff out to our overnight junk, we had 30 minutes to unpack before lunch – all the while motoring towards our anchorage location (3 hours away). The rooms (each with its own bathroom) were more pleasant than expected – although the room was cold and the shower leaked ALL over the bathroom. The dining area was fine – although as with our Mekong boat trip, EVERY conceivable service person was eagerly hoping we'd spend extra for bar stuff, spa stuff, lord knows what other stuff. And if that wasn't enough, once we arrived at the anchorage area, these (mostly) women rowing open boats full of western snacks were EVERYWHERE, hitting ALL the junks up (as in: rowing right up alongside the ship and yelling up to anyone they saw in hearing distance, trying to sell shit). Junk meals were so-so, and I say that because I suffered my first round of DIARRHEA 24 hours after getting off the boat; and glimpses of the cooking situation did not sit well with me, as a microbiologist.



Left to Right: snack lady rowboat, crazy cave, view of bay outside cave, quiet rowboat tour

So as not to unnecessarily belabor this section, I will briefly summarize our activities post-anchorage: First, we rode the skiff to this cave, where we amassed in a cattle-line of HUNDREDS of tourists and walked through the HIGHLY impacted caverns. Although our trip itinerary describes the cave as "beautifully illuminated," the crazy neon lighting was tacky and unnatural. We then rode the skiff towards this area that – PRAISE JEBUS – was off-limits to motorized boats; and so we loaded into a big row-boat (like the snack ladies used) and were taken through a cave-like arch into this circular bay with NO ONE... except monkeys flying through the treetops WAY up in the limestone formations. Although I thought about including a picture, the views were not that jaw-dropping and the monkeys were too far away. Following dinner, I retired early – but, alas, my dock rock was agitated by the constant swaying of the boat; it would take 2 weeks (and meclizine) to fully tamp down. Following breakfast the next morning, some of us headed (first via skiff) to this sandy-beached island where we climbed 400 steep stairs to this temple-topped viewpoint (again - bad weather and too much JUNK). Although I've included a couple shots below, the only meritorious things about this excursion were: (1) standing on terra firma; and (2) the exercise. Upon returning to the junk, it was already time to motor back to Halong City. Although I was shocked at how limited the activities were in the bay, I'm glad I had the opportunity to learn this stuff on this trip because I had considered another company who spent, like, 5 days here (albeit with some sea kayaking). Man – that would have sucked, that's all I can say. I did enjoy our ride back

more because there was a teensy bit of clearing, and I made more effort to appreciate the rocks from the upper deck. Nevertheless, I would NOT come back to Halong and I would NOT recommend it to my friends/family. Alas, our main guide and I did not see eye to eye on the impact here – sufficed to say I feel VERY strongly that serious reductions in tour boat access needs to happen... and I'm SHOCKED UNESCO doesn't seem to care. The rest of the day was a LONG and tedious reverse repeat of the ride in, with us arriving back in Hanoi at 4:30 p.m. – just in time for an early dinner before our hour-long evening flight to Hue (pronounced H-way). Arriving there in POURING rain around 7, we quietly rode a new giant bus 45 minutes to the center of town – where we stayed at the upscale Saigon Morin for the next 2 nights. Exhausted, I showered and went straight to bed.



Left to Right: morning climb (right up left profile), view from top, clearest moment during ride back, floating villages

December 25, 2011: Hue Too Much Drizzle and the Vietnam Colonic

On paper, Hue (population 300,000) sounded like a magical place: another UNESCO site, situated along the Perfume River, the “intellectual, cultural, and spiritual heart of Vietnam” (Lonely Planet). In reality, it was soggy, foggy, and not as interesting (IMO) as other places we'd seen or would see... which was sad because our local guide was positively excited. Of course, my excitement was more negative – having suffered 3 rounds of explosive diarrhea all before 9 a.m. Merry Christmas! Initially, I popped an immodium (only the second time EVER that I've done that) and ate a bread- and banana-oriented breakfast. After warning our leader of the situation, I decided to continue – although I did skip the early-bird local market tour. Today's pre-lunch activities took us by bus to the countryside. The goal was to visit a couple Royal Tombs of the Nguyen Dynasty: Tu Duc's Japanese Garden-like complex (1800's), and Khai Dinh's more gothic-feeling grounds (1920's - he was, for all intensive purposes, a puppet leader and had to beg/convince the French to build him this complex). Although I'm sure some of the facts behind our local guide's presentation were lost in translation, several of us concluded that both of these men hated women, sounded gay, and – although technically married (sort of to multiple women) – their official royal heirs were probably conceived with close male relatives. Tu Duc was an exceptionally poetic nature-boy, as it were – although both men LOVED to decorate with insanely colorful inlaid ceramics and glass; even Khai Dinh was garishly floral when it came to his actual tomb interior. Although Tu Duc's complex seemed more run-down (and was exceptionally slippery, given slick moss on smooth stonework), it was more sprawling – and we spent the most time walking the grounds... umbrellas in hand.



Left to Right: (top) Betsy and inflatable, traveling Christmas tree, me at Tu Duc complex – ceramic tiles, forest, royal tomb area; (bottom) Khai Dinh complex – first stairwell, second stairwell, statuary, dragon entryway, interesting trees, tomb area detail

For lunch, we returned to downtown Hue. Given that I was definitely plugged up, I decided to join the afternoon “dragon-boat” ride down the Perfume River to visit the Thien Mu Pagoda grounds, followed by the eerie Citadel. A couple people (notably - NOT suffering diarrhea), bailed on said activities – a sign that some of us were getting worn out. And I think we all agreed said people were lucky because the boat trip, in particular, was SAD. We sat in ghetto plastic lawn chairs on a wooden floor that had sufficient space between the boards such that you could see the river. The loud motor coughed a lot. The scenery was a big fat zero. And if all that wasn't bad enough: this woman started modeling silk clothing and bothering us to buy things... this went on for 10 minutes. After that, most of us didn't say a word for fear said woman would think we had changed our minds about shopping. After an hour, we arrived at Thien Mu Pagoda. Built in the 1600's, this site became extremely symbolic in the 1960's because a monk from the complex publically committed

self-immolation in Hue, protesting the corrupt Diem government (notably backed by the US). Said regime promptly murdered many more monks, ultimately leading to Diem's downfall and the escalation of American involvement. Alas, though, the grounds were drizzly, foggy, slippery, and more of the sleepy same. We did all perk up when we learned that we did NOT have to take the dragon-boat back. Our bus was waiting to drive us to the Citadel, heavily damaged during the Tet Offensive. Indeed, bullet-holes still riddled walls and HUGE bombed-out grounds spread out centrally - level, save overgrown foundations where ancient temples used to stand. The Citadel WAS Vietnam's Forbidden City, home to a Royal Palace (complete with eunuchs). Walking through its moat-surrounded walls, we passed multiple temples, ponds, and statuary, before arriving at the central area of bombed-out nothingness. Although our original trip itinerary said something about dining within the Citadel, we returned to the hotel – the “special” Christmas plan being to partake in the hotel's attempt at a traditional Christmas dinner. By this point, though, enough people had warned/convincing me that immodium could prolong GI problems because prevented toxins from leaving the body. Thus, I bailed on dinner so I could purge (i.e. take Dulcolax) – hence the re: line on my email home that night: Vietnam Colonic. I was later told I made a lucky choice – as dinner was SAD.



Left to Right: (top) dragon-boat, Thien Mu Pagoda and adjacent temples and bonsai, fish frenzy; (bottom) Citadel grounds

December 26-7, 2011: Southward to Hoi An... and Pizza, Pizza

The next morning, we left Hue for good, boarding the bus for a nearly all-day drive (with a few stops) to Hoi An. Our first stop, 45 minutes in, was a leg-stretching break that involved walking around a small, unnamed seaside village. Here, we saw lots of boats, some of which seemed like actual dwellings. As usual, the children swarmed us... but even I was getting weirded out photographing foreign children; indeed, the photo below (showing group members taking pictures of the kids) sent Ellen into conniptions about “white women taking pictures of little ethnic kids.” Even at the time, though, I caught myself thinking: if a bunch of foreigners showed up in an American neighborhood and walked into people's yards, fed their children candy, and took pictures of children like this, we would DEFINITELY not respond well: minimally, police would be called; maximally, gun-toting families might draw their own weapons. The saddest thing, of course, is that as we were all getting back on the bus this little boy positioned himself right by the door and, with his hand outstretched (and a big smile), retorted: HELLO-MONEY (as though these words were always said together). THAT says it all.



Left to Right: unnamed seaside village break, Vietnam's Highway 101 equivalent, looking south from big Hai Van pass

After this point, we made a LONG climb to Hai Van (“Sea Cloud”) Pass, followed by a LONG descent over what felt like Vietnam's version of coastal Highway 101. It should be noted that there is a tunnel THROUGH this section of mountains, cutting the drive well in half – but we were hoping for views (HA HA). Had it not been foggy and drizzly, I'm sure the views would have been more exciting – particularly because, for the first time on the Vietnam leg of this trip, we were mostly seeing forests and rivers... not impact and development. In general, this area of coastal mountains represents for former DMZ line between North Vietnam (communist, Ho Chi Min-organized, their center Hanoi) vs. South Vietnam (all over the board, Diem-troubled, their center Saigon). The first big city to the north of this zone was Hue – site of serious uprisings against the Diem regime. The first big city to the south was Danang, home to so-called China Beach – a famous R&R area for US troops. Before Danang, however, we stopped for lunch at a nearly deserted coastal resort – the waves impressive, rolling in from the East China Sea. Continuing through Danang, we next stopped at the Marble Mountains. The Marble Mountains (which are, in fact, marble) consisted of 5 giant rock islands that rise up from the Danang suburbs.

Each is named after one of the primary elements: water, wood, fire, metal, and earth. For just over an hour, we traversed the water mountain (Thuy Son), climbing ~400 feet up sometimes very steep and uneven stone stairs (some members of our group opted out). On the large and jungle-y top plateau, we walked through a series of landscaped temple areas and made our way through large to small grotto-like caves (none of which photographed well) before finally descending a different set of steep, uneven stairs – notably in view of the easy way up: an eyesore elevator.



Left to Right: (top) Marble Mountains; (bottom) elevator, water buffalo plowing near Hoi An, government Hoi An hotel

Although Marble Mountain was a good source of exercise and the bigger caves were cool, it was – yet again – a sort of strange trip... particularly because the minute we arrived at the bottom, throngs of sales-people thronged us. Indeed, industry and marble venders surrounded the whole mountain – begging the question: if they are quarrying all the marble, won't the mountains eventually be leveled? Although our guides originally thought we'd want to do some shopping, the consensus was: please call the bus now. And so it was. Within 45 minutes, we arrived at Hoi An, another UNESCO site (population 80,000) and our home for the next 2 nights. Being that it was earlier than expected, we had over 2 hours to rest and clean up before dinner. Surrounded by picturesque farmlands, Hoi An is located a little inland – but along a sort of New Orleans-like set of waterways that ultimately leads to the sea. Hoi An is an historic trading center, with Chinese, Japanese, and European influence. Our hotel in Hoi An was government-run – analogous to Spain's paradors (but not using historic buildings). While most members of our group did NOT like this hotel, I thought it was fine. The main issue regarded the fact that a huge primary school was located across the street, meaning the kid noise was pretty bad at certain times of the day. I guess I found it amusingly hypocritical that people who LOVED to photograph little kids were so bothered by the sound of little kids actually playing. In any event, I enjoyed a long bath and a whole bunch of TV that afternoon – before we headed out on foot to dinner. Indeed, our hotel was 2 blocks away from Hoi An's vehicle-free walking-only zone, our restaurant another 2 blocks within. Like MANY restaurants in this town, ours was jam-packed with white people... and, making matters worse, many of them were eating PIZZA. GOOD LORD. What we would have collectively done to eat pizza that night... but, no, we were having more Vietnamese food – course after course after course. News that tomorrow night's dinner was "on your own" sent great excitement through our table – and we immediately began planning our quest for the best pizza in town. And so, with pizza on the brain, we returned to the hotel.



Left to Right: temple complex, spiral incense, carp, old merchant home/museum, mossy roof, famous local noodles

My only complaint about this hotel regarded the morning breakfast buffet: namely, that there were SWARMS of bugs around the fruit platters, not to mention bugs/debris in most bowls. Having said that, I ate my first passion fruit – and it was delicious. Today's activities were similar to our one full day in Hue, only we didn't have a bus. Even after looking at the guidebooks, though, I'm not 100% sure which exact things we visited. Walking back into the vehicle-free zone, we first established where our lunch spot was – because we eventually would be turned loose for some shopping, and were expected to find our way back here around 1. We then walked down to this garish pink temple complex that said "disco" more than it said "tradition." I THINK this complex was the "Assembly Hall of the Fujian Chinese Congregation" (based on Lonely Planet's description and map location). Inside, we made our way to various Chinese sub-shrines, most focused on trade and shipping. We then moved on to an historic merchant's private home that was now a local history museum (it sounds like what Lonely Planet calls Tan Ky House – but the location was not along the waterfront/Thu Bon River).

From here, we walked to the big open market – which I had been warned to avoid (in part) because of the fishy fish section. And so I separated from the group – and misunderstood the plan... because I thought we were now free to shop until 1. And so I purchased some local silk products and the iPho (made in Vietnam) T-shirt I had been coveting for some time. Hoi An is apparently famous for quick turnaround silk tailors – and some members of our group had gone out yesterday for whole-suit fittings. Given my always-casual attire, I think it is safe to say that I did not have any suits made. But, bag in hand, I did stumble into the rest of our group – they having just come out of the fishy fish market - now on their way to the Japanese Covered Bridge and old town area (after which was the free shopping hour). Together, we continued a couple blocks along the waterfront and arrived at the bridge (hmmm – thinking back: maybe seeing THIS was why I was possessed to watch “Bridges of Madison County” during the flight home... where is that Clint?). But this bridge was crowded and annoying. After walking through/over the bridge, we entered the old town part of Hoi An – but it seemed more touristy upscale than charmingly old... the salespeople more aggressive, the wares more western-driven than traditional (this from someone carrying around an iPho shirt... yes, I know). And so I cut short my shopping time by returning to the lunch spot and sitting down early to enjoy some tea and people-watching. After lunch, we – as in Hue – boarded a small boat to cruise around the extensive waterways and nearby islands. Although group members were actively making remarks like: this isn't going to be another DRAGON-BOAT ride is it (?), this boat ride didn't suck nearly to the extent that the Hue trip had. But I'm not going to say it was amazing. The highpoints were: (1) looking back at the scenic waterfront (which looked like small-scale, yellow, dirtier version of Venice); (2) noting the sharp, income-driven contrasts in houses; (3) seeing a close-up water buffalo; and (4) stumbling onto what we thought was a charming “real” fisherman casting his net... only to have him do it several times (no fish!) and then row up and demand money (with a big smile, nevertheless). HELLO-MONEY!!!! Just another day in Vietnam.



Left to Right: (top) Japanese Covered Bridge, waterfront tour boats, upper vs. middle class neighborhood, water buffalo; (bottom) interesting local and boat, professional model net-casting, waterfront – Casa Verde pizza, lanterns (right before international incident)

By the time we were back on shore, it was 4 – and the rest of the day was on our own. The pizza sub-party (representing half the group) planned a 6 p.m. meeting time – leaving me plenty of time for a bath, internet, and BBC/CNN. The pizza sub-party had its heart set on extremely well-rated “Casa Verde,” located right on the waterfront. When we arrived, however, all but one table was full – and the owner initially suggested there was no room. As we stood downtrodden on the sidewalk, he summoned us back – and gave us someone else's table (we learned later that said party had already stood him up once today – so we didn't feel too bad). Casa Verde's chef and owner was this 40-something Swiss man who had spent 23 years “cooking around the world” before settling in Hoi An 7 years ago (probably for good). His focus here was pizza (DELICIOUS) and gelato (EVEN BETTER!). Of course, the first thing put down before us was a dressed salad – which our party discussed/debated for some time (was it safe?). Eventually, the chef/owner came out and explained the precautions he took with produce – and 5/6 of us ate freely, but 1/6 did not. To date, no one has gotten sick from this meal... so I'm going to fully endorse the delicious salads as Café Verde. Then, each of us ate our own 12” diameter pizza. I also enjoyed a lemon gelato shake, and a big scoop of chocolate gelato for dessert. I am only slightly ashamed to say that this was my favorite meal on this whole trip. Unfortunately, we got into a fight with one of the local women along the waterfront after the meal. One of the traditions here is to buy paper/candle lanterns on styrofoam floats and then send them down the river (which, owing to the incoming tide, was currently flooding some areas of the waterfront sidewalk). Someone in our party decided to buy 6 floats so we could each partake; unfortunately, the salesperson (after the fact) started audibly yelling at all of us, insisting we'd short-changed her. I managed to walk away without getting involved – but I have to say: for all the CRAP we were told about never raising our voice or “losing face” in Vietnam, this local woman sure as hell had NO qualms about throwing a public fit... TOTALLY violating every supposed cultural rule. QUITE embarrassing. Unfortunately, this was not the only international incident (as they became known) among members of our group in terms of money exchange issues – but it was the only one I witnessed and felt I could describe.

December 28-9, 2011: A Moment in Danang, a Moment in Saigon/Ho Chi Min City – and FINALLY to Siem Reap/Angkor

The next morning, we got another late start because our scheduled early afternoon flight to Saigon was – as usual – delayed. Hitting the road around 9:30, we made a short stop at so-called China Beach – which is rapidly vanishing amidst seaside development south of Danang. Indeed, MILES of coastline are being developed into Vegas-style resorts – MOSTLY to specifically attract Chinese tourists. We then headed into Danang and were the first ones at the Cham Museum, a more interesting place than I was expecting - and a nice

bridge/segue into the final Cambodian leg of our journey. Cham, as should be obvious from the photos below, represents an Indian-origin Hindu ethnic group that straddled Cambodia and Vietnam – the people looked more full-figured (in the face, lips, boobs) and curlier/thicker hair. As stated at some point in the museum, my little boobies were feeling very threatened by the giant boobies everywhere... right down to boob-themed decorative trim on many large sculpture designs. From the museum, we proceeded to a Chinese restaurant where another insanely over-done lunch was waiting. I recall being very crabby through lunch, uninterested in forcibly eating all the fish substitutes that came my way for no good reason. Not surprisingly, I FINALLY started my period – 10 DAYS late (perhaps the alpha-female Cham boobs kick-started it). From the restaurant, it was a short drive to the BRAND new airport (complete with an in-gate Burger King), where we waited 90 minutes hours for our hour-long flight.



Left to Right: (top) Left to Right: Danang – China Beach & development to south, Cham Museum – boobs EVERYWHERE, I swear! (bottom) Vietnamese guide, Saigon from air, handful of the 4 MILLION riders in Saigon, posh hotel room

We arrived in Saigon (population 8 million) around 5 and, needless to say, made a SLOW journey by bus through INSANE rush-hour traffic. Even though Saigon is larger than Hanoi, it felt more familiar and western than ANY place we visited in Laos, Vietnam, or Cambodia. The city was cleaner, traffic more orderly, buildings more modern. Although many people in our group preferred Saigon to Hanoi (despite our short stay here), I (as stated and justified previously) liked Hanoi WAY more. Saigon, of course, was the stronghold of the American-backed regime until its downfall (when it was renamed Ho Chi Min City). As was an interesting conversation topic in our group: it seemed ironic that, despite said “downfall,” Saigon is the largest city in Vietnam and a LOT of people clearly embrace what is a more western place... begging the question: Who Really Won? Although our hotel (the 15+ story Caravelle) was posh, it stood in the shadow of more celebrated places like the nearby Continental and the Majestic, both made famous by the likes of Graham Greene (The Quiet American). After arriving at the hotel, we had a 90-minute break before dinner – a short walk down the block. And so went down another major eating fest. The next morning, I was up at 6 a.m. – working out at the GREAT fitness center, which was notably brimming with sweaty white businessmen who were WAY more aggressive than wimpy me on the treadmill. And then it was time for the REAL workout: fighting for food and a table in the continental breakfast area (I swear the ENTIRE hotel arrived at the same time - the eating area designed for – at best – 25% total occupancy). Needless to say, I was crabby most of the day – my now INSANE period and the hotter-than-shit heat only escalated my lack of amusement. Complicating matters again, our planned afternoon flight to Siem Reap/Angkor Wat was delayed (surprise, surprise)... and so, once again, we had more time to kill than planned. Our first stop was less than 10 minutes away: the pink Eifel-designed post office – which still functions as a post office, but now has major pictures of Uncle Ho on the walls... not to mention a shitload of VERY free-market/un-communist gift stalls. Across the street from Eifel’s post office is a big catholic church – where a VERY white wedding, “modern” Vietnamese couple was having their pictures taken.



Left to Right: Eifel’s post office – outside and inside shots (note Uncle Ho), white wedding and catholic church

From the Eifel-church square, we proceeded to the Reunification Palace, which was built in 1966 to serve as South Vietnam’s presidential palace. When Saigon ultimately fell to the North Vietnamese, said site was heavily destroyed – classic war images of communist tanks bursting the walls. In what seems sheer irony, though, the whole place was rebuilt and restored – and remains a popular tourist site. The main/front floors were all formal meeting halls and conference rooms with a definite 1960’s vibe. Behind the

main complex were the first family home quarters. And downstairs were the bunkers and war-rooms, all reminding me of a Pentagon tour my dad once facilitated for Ellen and I: pragmatic conference rooms with maps on the walls, special red phones. Unfortunately, I was beyond overheated (the sweat pouring down every part of my body) and, once in the bunker, claustrophobic to the point I rushed that part of the tour - meeting everyone later after finding a comfortable sitting spot near a fan. By this point, it was around noon and we headed to a Clinton Icon: Pho 2000, named for the year Bill and Chelsea ate there... the first visit by an American President since THE WAR. Pho 2000 was another place where we ate amongst the masses. Afterwards, though, we had that aforementioned extra hour that, for me, was awkward and goofily spent. Sweaty beyond words and loaded up on cramp-killing pain relievers, I just wanted to climb in a lukewarm bath and be by myself; instead, our only option (being that the bus was nowhere convenient) was to go (GOD FORBID) shopping... as we were adjacent to one of the big city market areas... BUT beware of pick-pocketers here, because it's coming up on New Year's and they will be especially rabid... blah, blah, blah.



Left to Right: Reunification Palace – exterior, interior, war-room with maps and phones; eating pho at the Clinton table

Fortunately, the bus arrived a little early and soon we were off to the airport. I remember SOOOOO little about this transition, though, having JUST messed around with airports and flying yesterday. All I know is that I was (and I think we all were) SOOOOO happy to FINALLY be going to Cambodia/Angkor Wat... but, by this point, I – for one – was INSANELY happy (possibly MORE happy than I was about Angkor Wat) at the thought that we were going to spend THREE solid nights in the same location. PRAISE JEBUS!!!! The hour-long flight between Saigon and Siem Reap took us over highly waterlogged land. While my travel medicine consult DR had NOT recommended anti-malarial drugs for Angkor Wat, half of our group members had been explicitly told they NEEDED anti-malarials here because we were REALLY close to some serious malaria areas. Looking down at all the water, I started to wonder – Ellen's stories of being THROGGED with mosquitoes just getting out of the plane dancing in my head. In retrospect, we did encounter the MOST mosquitoes in Cambodia (killing 5-10 just in the bus every day) – and, as a freaky microbiologist, I would take the drugs were I ever to come back. But I digress: we landed in Siem Reap around 4:45 – the sunlight starting to turn golden as we drove to our hotel. At least 3 other large jets were parked on the runway when we arrived, indicating how NUTS Angkor Wat is as a tourist destination. We drove 20 minutes to our hotel, passing the main gate to Angkor Wat proper – THROGGED of people everywhere given the popular sunset viewing. A new addition since Ellen's visit, there was even a static line balloon area where people paid to rise a couple hundred feet off the ground for a semi-aerial perspective-acular (needless to say, Ellen was highly offended to hear this). Unlike Ellen (who stayed in Siem Reap proper – population 200,000), we were at a sprawling "resort" about a mile outside the city. While this sometimes made me feel more isolated from reality (and a convenient ATM), I ultimately LOVED (and am not ashamed to say I LOVED) retreating from all the Angkor MADNESS every night to this oasis of insane luxury and quiet.



Left to Right: Siem Reap airport, my FABULOUS room for THREE nights, dinner dancing – traditional and folk

Within 30 minutes of arriving, the sun vanished. Although I was never interested in nightlife, it should be noted that – in contrast with other places during this trip – the Cambodia resort was not close to anything (e.g. bars, market, etc.). For folks wanting that stuff, one could pay \$2 for a tuk-tuk into town... but I think it says a lot that, by this point, no one in our group ventured out – because we were all fried from traveling. I have also been asked if you could visit Angkor itself at night – but the answer to that is NO... because they FULLY shut that down following sunset. With just over 2 hours before our dinner buffet at the hotel, I enjoyed my AWESOME room – a great bath, doing all my laundry (in the sink), and watching most of The King's Speech on HBO. And in contrast with future buffets, tonight's was delicious and entertaining – featuring a welcome array of western foods (especially the bread and butter, and the extensive dessert bar). But also, there was a Khmer dance performance featuring a local dance troupe doing a combination of traditional dancing (wearing all the headdresses we would see adorning Angkor tomorrow) and more folk-style story-dances focused on things like fishing and the rice harvest (the latter included male dancers). Given that we had been FULLY warned we needed to be up at 6:00 (when breakfast started) and on the bus by 6:45 to avoid the insane crowds, I was in bed by 9:30 – and asleep shortly thereafter.

December 30, 2011: Across Angkor Wat Proper, Some Angkor Tom – Elephant Terrace Area, Bayon

Before proceeding, I need to preface with the following: (1) Angkor is BEYOND overrun with tourists – so if you think you can avoid the crowds, you are SADLY mistaken... the place is already gone, in my opinion (and by gone I mean: the numbers are only going up and

they will never go down unless something really bad happens). Of course, my pictures seldom reflect this because I made every attempt to avoid people in the pictures, including waiting a fair bit, and getting up early – which, THANK GOD, we were made to do. Indeed, WT planned the Angkor portion of this trip extremely well, coming into overcrowded places from less popular entrances to avoid BRUTAL crowds. (2) Even though Angkor was the BIGGEST draw on this trip, I have to say that I took – relatively speaking – fewer pictures here than I thought I would, or that I could have... half because we'd seen SOOOOO much by this point... and half because the crowds were a MAJOR turn-off. (3) "Angkor Wat" refers only to the most photographed/publicized main temple area (wat = temple); nearby is Angkor Thom, the HUGE walled city... and, beyond that are thousands of other Khmer/Angkorian ruins. In general, the timeline on all these structures is 800 to 1300 A.D., with Angkor Wat completed around 1100. While some people say Angkor represents the largest religious structure in the world, I am not convinced – because I think it's challenging to define what a religious structure really is. Anyway – we arrived at the entrance gate right when they opened. My understanding is that each Angkor sector is owned/run by different individuals/groups – and there is a lot of government-facilitated favoritism/nepotism/corruption involved... such that the most popular places are run by a few choice people who are now filthy rich (and don't put much back into the community). Each of us paid \$40 for a 4-day pass to the main complexes near Siem Reap. Think about that: it only costs \$20 for an up-to 8-person private vehicle to enter a national park and those passes are good for 7 whole days. So – even though Cambodia sounds like it is going to be dirt-cheap, the Angkor price tag is more expensive than comparable UNESCO park entrance fees in the US. Of course, we each also got our own photo-ID ticket for that fee – which we had to show many times each day. From the entrance area, we drove halfway around Angkor Wat proper (paralleling its MASSIVE man-made moat) to the east gate entrance – which was placid, in all senses of the word (still water, no crowds, no sales-people). For the next 4 hours, we walked across the entire Angkor Wat complex.



Left to Right: Angkor entrance/fee area, moat around Angkor Wat proper – east gate, dancer details – lichen, chalk enhancement

The east gate, like most Angkorian construction, involves an internal iron-rich clay mudstone called laterite. This stuff is apparently cut soft from the ground and then hardened in the sun/air; it looks like some combination of volcanic rock, travertine, and Vishnu schist. This skeletal foundation was then covered with sheets of sandstone – i.e. just like stuff in Utah. Later, we visited one of the sandstone quarries – where sheets of sandstone were literally sawed out of the earth. The sandstone was carved with intricate bas-relief designs – although, it (being a soft stone) has a lot of damage and is wearing away. Relative to what it looked like in its heyday, surviving bas-relief sections are far and few between, having fallen off, been damaged, or been removed – a HUGE problem throughout Angkor. Here at the east gate, though, the iron color of the laterite was seeping through the sandstone, providing lots of red - in conjunction with fabulous lichens. Additionally, we were told, the locals like to further adorn the dancing girls with chalk make-up – as seen above. Of course, we never saw that anywhere else – so maybe the guides were pulling our leg. After walking through the east gate, we arrived at the outer wall of the main Angkor Wat building. Climbing a short set of stairs, we arrived at one of the best-preserved bas-relief walls in the whole complex – and spent ~20 minutes slowly walking along the open hallway as our local guide described some of the key scenes/ideas, most of which were showing battles between good and evil (e.g. the naga tug-of-war) and heaven and hell.



Left to Right: Angkor Wat from east, hallway extending from temple – bas-relief within hall: naga tug-of-war, more dancers

From here, we entered the inner part of the complex, ultimately arriving at the one "legal" stairway you can climb to the top part of the temple. Since Ellen visited here, they have installed "safe" steps (with railings) that effectively cover the original stone ones that she had to climb. Nevertheless, even the safe stairs are ~30 feet vertical and 70° angle. While they didn't bother me, some others in our group were nervous – with one person backing out of the climb. From the top, the views of the towers were excellent – as were the views out over the grounds. But I cannot say I took many pictures from up there – in part because the skies were clouding up, and the views looked very similar once you were "inside" the temple. Although built by Hindus, attempts to post-Buddha-ize the complex were evident in various ways, usually via several mini-temple/altars with statues of the Buddha located variously. I elected not to include any photographs of these areas – in part because they weren't interesting, and also because I don't consider them authentic. Descending the same safe stairwell, we continued west through the middle floor of the temple area – admiring more bas-relief before descending a short set of monkey-strewn stairs (wild macaques, I believe) to the ground again (as in – walking on bare earth trails). Soon, we arrived at the big reflecting pools where the real hoards of people began. Even more bothersome, though, was the adjacent shopping complex, where REALLY aggressive sales-people thronged you relentlessly. Apparently, said sales-people used to be allowed to work

you over ALL through the complex... but now they are segregated to just this one area by the reflecting pools (and then again outside the main gates of the sites, but still within the paid-entry boundaries of the park – for lack of a better word). Walking through truly HUGE incoming crowds, we left Angkor Wat proper, via long, naga-lined stone bridges over the moat. Here, competing wedding parties (one in yellow, the other green) were vying for good views and the crowd's attention (green won my favor, as shown below)... along with a pair of monks taking smart phone pictures of each other. Surreal, that's all I can say.



Left to Right: (top) original stairs, towers, safe stairs, top view, stone-lathe work; (bottom) monkey business – PUN INTENDED

By this point, it was about 10:30 – and we drove to the expansive Angkor Thom (easily 5X larger than the walled grounds of Angkor Wat). We entered via the Victory gate, which BARELY fits small buses (if I haven't mentioned it, our Cambodia bus was half the size of the Vietnam monsters, specifically because we needed to fit through the original stone-wall gates). There are 5 gates that enter Angkor Thom (one from each direction, plus the second east/Victory one). Not all are functional in terms of road access. Each gate is preceded by a ~200-foot section that is flanked by warriors in the naga tug-of-war: on one side are the pretty heavenly warriors (which I managed not to photograph because they were sort of boring), on the other are the ugly hellish warriors (which I photographed extensively, because they were much more interesting). Sadly, many warrior heads have been sawed off and sold on the black market prior to UNESCO designation, yielding \$1-2K to the in-country thieves, but then upwards of \$50K once they got into places like New York – where they actually showed up in prestigious auction houses. Additional damage during the war/bombing and Khmer Rouge years has also taken a big toll. As should be evident below, some sawed off heads have been returned, others restored.



Left to Right: (top) Victory Gate - warriors from hell & big feet, my impression of favorite warrior from hell; (bottom) elephant rides near... Elephant Terrace details, broken animal pile, overgrown temple

After spending 15 minutes walking along/photographing the warrior line-up and gate, we re-boarded the bus and headed into the central part of Angkor Thom – passing the Bayon (which we would return to later in the day), and continuing to the Elephant Terrace, where we were dropped off. We then headed out on foot, walking along the terraces, past the beautiful Phimeanakas Palace (so lovely that I picked it as the representative Angkor cover shot at the beginning), and then back in the woods to some (in my opinion) less

interesting overgrown ruins. Indeed, SO much of Angkor is scattered ruins. Of course, by this point, the only thoughts in my head were: MUST find a bathroom. Indeed, this was a theme the whole time in Angkor – my hydration level (which was excellent), which lead to frequent bathroom needs. Ultimately, I had to leave the group and venture on my own to find a restroom – skipping a more calm walk along the Terrace of the Leper King (which I never even photographed during my mad dash to the road). Although the guide pointed me in the right direction and I consulted maps along the way, I got WAY lost in the crazy tourist facilities area by the road – heading right when I should have turned left. For 10 minutes, I wandered in full sun through the INSANE parking lot (convinced I was going to fully wet my pants) before I had the sense to turn around. When I finally emerged, everyone was at the bus waiting, convinced I had been out there shopping (the LAST thing on my mind!). Given that it was now coming up on noon, we headed into ugly downtown Siem Reap – which made me glad to be staying at the resort. Bypassing the KFC, we headed to a nice Cambodian restaurant where we ate outside in the shade. Although I (and others) were generally hot and sweaty, the daytime temperatures were only about 75-85... it was the high humidity that was bad. It was hard to tell any difference between this meal and most others on this trip; by this point, it was all just Asian food and most of our taste-buds were fatigued. But my passion fruit drink was exceptional, as was the sticky rice and mango dessert. After lunch, we took a siesta during the hottest part of the day – returning to the hotel for a 90-minute break (which I used for a shower and nap). Around 2:30, we headed back to the Angkor Thom/Bayon section.



Left to Right: (top) siesta oasis, east gate (?) and wall walk, Bayon and reflection; (bottom) Bayon details – bas-relief, stone faces

Although the Bayon was possibly my favorite site to visit/walk through, I was frustrated with my inability to capture good pictures of it. It simply was too big and complex for me to manage with my camera and no-doubt overwhelmed eyes. I also found the long, dark shadows really hard to work with given the dark rock. Although I started with the guide, I snuck off when the bas-relief discussions became less interesting than the prospect of climbing upstairs where all the big towers/faces were. Although disputed, the Bayon is sort of like a UN temple, with each tower honoring different regions, each tower-face representing additional sub-regions. Ironically, what I most liked about Bayon (other than its complex tower-faces) was an artifact of its dilapidation: namely, all the lone pillars around the complex were beautiful, giving it a sort of Stonehenge feel. In fact, all those pillars used to support extensive covered walkways (like those in Angkor Wat, with the bas-relief)... but the ceilings have broken, the rubble piled along the edges. Eventually, we headed back to the resort where it was another “on your own” dinner night. Although many folks had talked up tuk-tuk-ing it into town for more pizza, EVERYONE stayed on the premises... either eating in the hotel restaurant (PAINFULLY slow) or ordering room service. Of course, my first order of business was a LONG walk down the main road to an ATM. Here, I got sucked into an all-encompassing but overpriced gift shop – ultimately buying a boobie lady dancer statue, and a naga-over-Buddha sandalwood carving. And then it was time for BAD pizza at the hotel, followed by excellent lychee gelato.



Left to Right: freshly planted rice along trail to Banteay Srei – temple, details, bas-relief, lotus in reflecting pool

December 31, 2011: Distant Angkor... TOO MUCH BUS

First, it cannot be overstated that Angkorian ruins (there are THOUSANDS) are spread over very large distances. Indeed, at least one site today was not even open when Ellen visited – and new sites are being discovered every few years. Today, our focus was on distant sites that are harder to reach – and not covered on mad-dash trips focused solely on Angkor Wat and Thom. Overall, today was

sometimes trying (including bladder-trying, in my case) because it seemed like we were doing a LOT of driving/moving just to see a lot of similar rubble-strewn sites. In contrast with yesterday, we were out ALL day – NO midday clean-up/siesta back at the hotel. Today, we left the hotel at 7 a.m., heading northeast from Siem Reap – our first goal being Banteay Srei (~60 minutes away). Banteay Srei, meaning Women’s Temple, was named as such because of its rich, beautiful, and detailed bas-relief... which was interpreted as something that only women could do. Banteay Srei was a fundamentally small temple, all made of very iron-laden laterite, giving it a very red-orange hue. In some ways, it was like a dolls-house version of the Bayon... albeit with more flower-like tower tops. Having said that, the grounds around Banteay Srei were more sprawling and high-end: there was a bona fide visitor center, a European style museum area with lots of presentations explaining the discovery and restoration process, a HUGE bathroom complex, and a giant shopping area. There was also nice landscaping (including freshly planted rice-fields) along the 10-minute walkway to the actual site. Talking with Ellen, it sounded like most of this development has sprung up in the last 5 years – which, given Banteay Srei’s small size and far distance, seemed excessive. But my impressions are colored by the fact that we were there SOOOOO early – before any crowds arrived. Unfortunately, although I thought Banteay Srei was unique and interesting, the lighting was just as bad as at Bayon and so I don’t feel I ever captured a representation of the whole site – given so many dark shadows from the adjacent trees.



Left to Right: more Banteay Srei – monkey-bird man, Cambodian guide, various bas-relief (included the 10-headed god, last)

After an hour at Banteay Srei, we hit the road for a nearly 2-hour drive to Beng Mealea (significantly southeast) – the site that wasn’t open until 2 years ago; that was when the landmines were cleared, and walkways were installed. Anyway - during this long drive, we passed small villages and a fair number of roadside home/farms... but most of the land was desolate and open, mostly dried out rice-fields. A significant portion of this drive was spent talking about the Khmer Rouge years (1975-1979), given that we were passing some of Cambodia’s Killing Fields. Perhaps the most interesting thing I learned was how big a role rice played in this ultimate holocaust – namely because one of Pol Pot’s goals was to increase rice production from 1 harvest per year to 3... because that’s what neighboring Vietnam was pulling in given their fundamentally wetter climate. Upon forcibly moving the city-folk to the country (and murdering many trouble-makers), each land unit was required to turn rice in to the central government at a rate that reflected this expectation. When sufficient tonnage was not achieved, the fingers started pointing at the community level – resulting in a second wave of brutal internal killing, followed by inevitable starvation because all the rice had been sent to the government. Indeed, ~3 million Cambodians died during the Khmer Rouge years – half murdered, half starved to death. Even our local guide, who was 2-5 years old at the time (young enough to remain with his mother), remembered having his father and his older siblings taken away to work – as family separation was a tenet of Pol Pot’s vision. One of our guide’s brothers never returned – likely having starved to death. After the Khmer Rouge years, our guide remembers being taken to see the regional Killing Fields mass graves by his father – as these realities were accepted and discussed by the people... but NEVER acknowledged by Pol Pot or surviving members of the regime. Indeed, just a few days before, the first international trials for said survivors (Pol Pot having died in 1998) had begun, a few hours away in Phnom Penh.



Left to Right: typical scenery drive to Beng Mealea, typical roadside home/farm, village stall selling French loaves, sandstone quarry

After 90 minutes of bumpy driving, my bladder situation became dire. At the time I spoke up, we were discussing this big sign about landmines. Although I was assured we were “very close” to acceptable restrooms, I still had to hold it another 20 minutes. I’ve decided my bladder moments in Cambodia represent karmic payback given the fact that I indirectly caused my mother to full-on wet her pants during our similarly long drive between Old Faithful and the Tetons this last summer. Anyway, we soon arrived at the entrance gate for Beng Mealea, owned and run through a different set of individuals – who, given the HUGE bank of new bathrooms, CLEARLY want to develop this area for THOUSANDS of tourists. After dealing with the bathrooms and paying up, we continued down the road another 10 minutes, briefly stopping along nondescript spot just beyond a tiny bridge. Here, we walked down to a nearly dry creek to one of the aforementioned sandstone quarries – which slightly reminded me of the quarries on Easter Island. And after that, it was another 10 minutes to Beng Mealea proper. As with other Angkor ruins, we approached the main temple via a long naga-lined path. Even though the main paths and central temple had been cleared of mines, you could not stray 100 feet off the main path because landmine clearing had not taken place even that close to public areas – which was sort of scary to think about given that there were few signs indicating the danger. Although Ellen couldn’t/didn’t visit Beng Mealea, she did visit what is now the Cambodia Landmine Museum (about 10 minutes from Banteay Srei) – which, when she was there, was barely more than a one-man operation – run out of his private residence.

Indeed, Ellen seemed rather outraged we had not been taken to this exhibit on this tour and, honestly, I sort of agree given (like I said) how many of the temples today just started running together. But Beng Mealea was an interesting contrast to other sites because so much was overgrown rubble – and elevated walkways through rocks and foliage were the only way to see the complex. At one point, too, we got to descend into this corridor, walking its dark length and emerging in another rubble-strewn courtyard.



Left to Right: all Beng Mealea, last shot is one of the few (and not obvious) landmine clearing sign

From Beng Mealea, we headed back to one of the little villages we'd driven through; there, we unloaded at this roadside place that definitely served drinks (because we bought plenty of those) and had tables where we were given boxed picnic lunches made back in Siem Reap (in part, by the hotel). Said lunches featured ham/cheese sandwiches on white bread, salad, fruit, and a delicious banana-nut bread. After lunch, we headed back toward Siem Reap – but entering from the east. En route, we stopped at the Rolous Group (specifically Bakong), the earliest of the Angkorian temples. In less than 30 minutes, we basically walked over this temple, climbing and then descending several steep tiers of stairs across the quiet pyramidal complex. At the other side, a very modern Buddhist monastery stood (complete with several orange-clad monks); interestingly, some of the Angkorian Hindu motifs (i.e. boobie women dancers) were reflected in the adornment of this temple, which I thought was sort of funny/ironic. As we left the complex, we passed a group of “landmine survivor” musicians – all crippled in some way by an explosion. There would be more of these groups tomorrow. Of all the Cambodians directly or indirectly asking for money (i.e. whether through selling cheap merchandise or through some kind of performance art like this), I was told this was one of the most legitimate – and so I did give them money.



Left to Right: (top) Rolous Group/Bakong –earliest Angkorian temples, and adjacent monastery – notably adorned with boobie women; (bottom) Angkor Wat sunset views – last shot it static line balloon and moat

From Rolous/Bakong, we returned (crossing the whole of sprawling Siem Reap) to the resort – arriving there at 4. In an hour, we'd have the option to return to Angkor Wat for the sunset viewing; at the time, I was tired and doubted I would partake. But a quick shower cured me of that – particularly because I couldn't imagine having come so far to only see the main temple once. At just before 5, I showed up in the lobby and met our guide – but, to both our surprises, I was the only interested party. But we headed in anyway,

making our way through the crowds (this time via the main entrance) just to the reflecting pools. Perhaps because I was now sort of jaded, it didn't seem as insane – even though I knew it was (being New Year's and all, on top of a REALLY spectacular sunset). What was frustrating, though: all the green tarp construction crap in view from this side, and the relentless sales-people (being that the reflecting pools are in range of the shopping complex). We spent 30 minutes watching the light change to a nice gold – before dimming into some low clouds. At the time, we thought that was it and started heading back; when we were beyond the last temple wall, the sun burst below/through at a really low angle – casting INCREDIBLE orange light everywhere... but, by then, we were too late to take THE picture. Oh well. Weaving our way across the extensive parking area, I was latched onto by this 12-YO boy who – for FIVE SOLID MINUTES (a LONG time, I can assure you) – repeated: I go to school every morning, I have no money for food... over and over and over again. Hawking these sets of bamboo bracelets (10 for 1 dollar – which he interspersed into his mantra every so often), he absolutely would not take ANY form of no. Eventually, the guide said something very stern to him in non-English – and the boy scampered away, upset. I would remain haunted by this for a few days (albeit – not enough to, like, pull an Angelina and adopt Cambodian children). On the ride home, I asked the guide where these kids get all this merchandise and was told there were a bunch of sales-pimps in town who loaded the kids up – the promise being a paltry commission. Indeed, something like 70% of Cambodia's current population is under 16 – an after-effect of the Khmer years. Sadly, though, it seemed that INCREDIBLE numbers of children in this area were, in some way, involved in this kind of crap-pushing – not to mention frustrated by tourists (i.e. not as happy as the kids in Laos, we all agreed), and “trained” to use guilt-ridding tactics to make their pitches/sales. I cannot imagine what this kind of experience and exposure will lead to in terms of adult attitudes – minimally toward westerners and tourism. Meanwhile back at the resort, the staff was gearing up for quite the hedonistic New Year's Eve celebration – the theme being Moulin Rouge (they had even flown in some kind of cabaret group from Malaysia, god help us all). Knowing I was NOT partaking in ANY festivities except the buffet dinner, I cleaned up, showed up RIGHT at 7, cleared a couple plates of food, and went to bed (seriously). Unfortunately, any good microbiologist will tell you that the terms “Cambodian New Year's buffet” translate into a high probability for ingesting a foodborne illness – thanks to MANY items that should have been on ice, or more heat, or more well-done (oh – but that uber-rare Australian prime rib roast WAS DELISH!). So ingest I did... and diarrhea I had – the next couple of mornings, and for a few weeks after the trip.



Left to Right: Angelina/Tomb Raider Temple – Ta Prohm

January 1-2, 2012: The Tomb Raider Temple, Another Night in Bangkok, and Going Home

New Year's Day, our last in Cambodia and the last of the guided tour, was a 3-hour trip to a couple nearby sites just outside Angkor Thom's walls: the first (and more interesting) was Ta Prohm – where they filmed parts of the first of the Lara Croft/Tomb Raider movies, and the second was Preah Khan. Leaving the resort around 7:30, we arrived at Ta Prohm within 15 minutes. To access Ta Prohm, we walked through a big gate and then down a jungle-lined path for 5 minutes. Disconcertingly, a small pack of wild dogs appeared – chasing another dog (hmmm – need to get that rabies vaccine next time); before our eyes, 5 dogs pinned the latter and – had some members of our group not intervened – would have probably ripped it apart. Instead, it walked away limping and bleeding – escorted by a local who claimed they would take care of it... presumably in a nice way (but I didn't believe that; it was probably going to be put on some fire like the Hmong village puppies back in Laos). Anyway - Ta Prohm is most famous for HUGE trees (fig, banyan, and kapok) growing down, through, and over the temples. Entering from a less popular side-gate, we walked through and around the complex – which was peacefully quiet given the time. Although there were really gorgeous parts of this complex (particularly given variably iron-red laterite and a stunning diversity of lichens), there was almost too much development here: many famous views of roots/trees on temple had some kind of viewing platform (usually with ropes or guard-rails) and these seemed an unnecessary eyesore. Also, there was a TON of construction at this site – with huge areas that were cordoned off, lots of equipment and scaffolding in view. I might be dreaming but I SWEAR someone said something about Angelina herself financing this project.



Left to Right: amazing lichen-iron wall, tree, construction

Although Ta Prohm was not a large site, we spent over an hour slowly walking and taking pictures. Of course, I finally succumbed to some jumping pictures (near the end of this report) – half because, well, there WAS a platform... and half because Ellen wasn't into jumping pictures when she visited Angkor Wat. Plus, our lead guide was SHOCKINGLY good at taking them – having CLEARLY practiced this before. From Ta Prohm, we were 10 driving minutes from our last site (not including a bathroom stop, of course): Preah

Khan. Entering from the north, we first crossed a small moat. Here, ALL the warrior heads of the naga tug-of-war had been sawed off; it was so disgusting to me that it set the stage for me wanting nothing to do with this site. That a number of sales-people followed us for SOME time (well beyond the acceptable boundary) only lowered my opinion of this place. Our local guide thought we would be here, like, a whole hour – somehow exploring all the side annexes, etc. But our group pretty much walked a fast B-line right down the middle of this multi-door/gated structure, our pace increasing as it became clear that a throng of tourists was coming from the other direction and no amount of waiting was going to clear them from our photographs. And then it was back to the resort for packing and a slightly annoying buffet lunch on site (can you say: WOW – there are a LOT of New Year's leftovers!! I think I will have a fresh bowl of pho).



Left to Right: funny toilet sign, views out over swamps, headless warriors, me and Uncle Bill (as Norwegians, we MUST be related)

Not surprisingly, our flight back to Bangkok was delayed again. But this time, our activity padding was more interesting – although I failed to bring my camera, having fully backed up all the memory cards and packed everything away. Specifically, we went back into Siem Reap – targeting this swank artisan complex that is training and employing locals in making serious arts and crafts. Like MANY other tourists, we walked the extensive grounds – watching the different trades: fabric/sewing/needlepoint, carving, lacquer/painting, and metal work. Needless to say, they also had an incredible store, which was – by far – the most tasteful shopping experience in Cambodia (and, frankly, on this entire trip!). I only wish we'd come earlier – because I would have gladly dropped more money here given the nature of what they were trying to achieve and the quality of the product and experience. At 3, we headed for the airport – which felt very western... right down to the Starbucks-like coffee shop/bakery/gelato bar and bona fide book/magazine store. Needless to say, a delicious peanut gelato was in order. Although our plane took off on time, we spent 45 extra minutes circling over Bangkok – meaning we were basically an hour late (on top of the 2 hour delay). Way back at the beginning of this trip (when I first stayed at the Novotel), I had visions of landing in Bangkok at 6, enjoying a relaxing swim – followed by some Japanese beef to celebrate surviving 16 days of intense travel. Now that I was here (3 hours late), the most I got was a quick shower and a slightly rushed udon/tempura shrimp meal with some green tea/red bean paste ice cream... followed by "in bed immediately" given a 5 a.m. wake-up.

All in all, the flights back were not as bad as I thought they'd be. On the plus side, all took off on time and the big ones even landed a little early. Thanks to the jet stream, the overall return flying time was 2 hours less than that heading to Bangkok. While I cannot remember my seat neighbor on the first leg to Narita, my seat neighbor on the Narita to Seattle run was this older Taiwanese-American piano teacher. On the minus side, I was not well going into this flight: I felt sick, couldn't stomach food all morning or through lunch, and had morning diarrhea to the point I took imodium again. After 7 hours of minimal eating, though, I landed in Narita (4:30 p.m. their time) and was FAMISHED. With 90 minutes on hand, I found a real McDonalds and consumed a \$10 quarter pounder meal in about 10 minutes – which was unbelievably satisfying. Although I'd hoped to catch some Z's on the long over-Pacific leg, our seat neighbor across the aisle was this obese Indian-American businessman who didn't even try to hold back his incredibly offensive coughing... and these fits came every 5-10 minutes for the ENTIRE 9 hour flight. The nature of his cough was, in my opinion, a product of his chest-compressing fat, incredibly poor health, and an obvious smoking addiction – not a scary infection. And so, while I wasn't afraid of catching something TB-like, I was beyond offended at this man's poor lifestyle choices... and annoyed to be stuck on a plane with him. Landing bleary-eyed in Seattle around 9 a.m., I enjoyed some snacks from Starbucks and a chat with Allison – all while admiring the lovely views of the snow-clad Olympics and Rainier. And then it was time for the SCARIEST flight of all: the puddle-jumper to Portland, through some near tornado-level winds and clouds (I later learned – NO SHIT!). Indeed, within 10 minutes, we were IN these dark and gnarly clouds – being tossed around wildly, lifting and dropping suddenly. And – even more frighteningly – the obese cougher was in the seat in front of me. Landing just before noon, Ellen picked me up and we enjoyed a snack at PDX's Flying Elephant Delicatessen – before heading to my home.



Left to Right: last day closing shots – jumping at Ta Prohm (for Ellen), contrasting female bas-relief (Ta Prohm, Preah Khan)

Closing Thoughts

As stated or discussed many times in this report, Ellen (on holiday in Washington with the family, having traveled from her new home in the Netherlands) picked me up in Portland and stayed with me and visited folks in Oregon for a couple days. During this time, she saw all my pictures, heard all my stories, and saw all the shopping booty (including receiving some gifts). As someone who lived in Asia

(Japan) for well over a decade and has visited several other Asian countries (China, Korea, Thailand, and Cambodia), Ellen has an appropriately experienced perspective on a trip like this. Having said that, I have a little more experience in developing countries (having seen Nepal, and more of South America). Nonetheless, it has been hard for me to assess my feelings (or Ellen's) about the relative levels of development (i.e. poverty) in Cambodia and Laos (in particular). Paul Simon has a poignant line in "You Can Call Me Al" (which I actually quoted in the Nepal report) about a man walking through the third world, but it being his first time around. And I think my perceptions about Nepal (that being my first time in a third world country) and Ellen's perceptions about Cambodia (that being her first time in a third world country) are something common but specific to each of us to keep in mind. When it is your first time seeing that kind of poverty, it really makes an impression – to the point that I don't think I can make objective comparative statements. But I did think the people/happiness vibe was greater in Nepal and Laos – and, as stated, I am MOST worried for Cambodia because the idea that SOOOO many children are growing up as pimp-serving tourist crap-pushers is NOT going to lead to ANYTHING good. As for Vietnam – the kids in the cities are definitely being educated, and – more importantly - being raised in a country that does not seem to need tourism (and sort of knows it)... and I fully respect that, despite feeling overall indifferent about the sight-seeing experience there. As for Ellen's concern about this tour being a "colonial zoo" trip (as aptly put by another friend of mine – in response to the whole "white people photographing ethnic kids" issue Ellen raised), it did have its moments on this trip and some local guides (i.e. Laos) were more aggressive promoters than others – but, on the whole, the stated focus of this trip was on history and culture... and WT was most true to this mission statement. In general, WT ran a good, smooth, and smart itinerary – and relatively comprehensive. Even though the 4 internal flights during this trip did eat a lot of time, the flights themselves were short and didn't fundamentally detract from the journey. Having said that, I honestly could have done without Saigon – and would have preferred flying directly between Danang and Siem Reap. The extensive eating on this trip could be simplified and, particularly in Vietnam, diversified. Having said that, it was nice, relaxing, and healthy to have so much downtime on this trip (e.g. typically a full 90 minutes before dinner). Although my GI tract didn't fare as well as my respiratory tract, I made the personal decision to eat all the fresh fruit and produce – even in Halong Bay, which is - in my opinion – unavoidably unsanitary. Compared with Ellen's Shigella-like diarrhea during her Cambodia trip, though, I think I came off pretty good. And, most importantly, I tolerated malarone and do not appear to have contracted malaria, dengue, or Japanese encephalitis... and (crossing my fingers) so far so good on the hypothetical leech bite. Hmmm – could a trip to Africa be far away?

As for what I did and didn't like about the sites on this trip – well, that should be pretty damn obvious if you fully read this report. I LOVED, LOVED, LOVED Laos – and firmly believe that Luang Prabang is as magical as everyone says. Of all the places we stayed, Luang Prabang felt the most homey, comfortable, safe, and peaceful... like I could rent a nice place for a month and be happy just being there and doing everyday things (whether getting a donut from the Scandinavian bakery or watching the monks). Although I'm not sure I'll ever go back to Hanoi again, it would be the first place in Vietnam I would return to... but not for the same reasons as Luang Prabang. Hanoi is more about the crazy spectacle, knowing and accepting I am a stranger in a strange land. As stated, I would NOT return to Halong Bay (period!). In the month since returning home, I have nearly finished a 500-page book about the Vietnam War (Fire in the Lake) and I will say that Hue, given its incredible history, is someplace that probably deserves a more careful look; plus, it seems to have several interesting-sounding war-related sites that we entirely skipped. But other places in Vietnam hold no interest, I'm afraid. As for Cambodia, I would still like to see Phnom Penh (specifically, the Killing Fields memorials) and Angkor Wat will never be off the second-time-around list... it's just not as high as Patagonia (which holds the highest rate of international returns in terms of my desire and nearly unconditional love). Finally, I have to say that spending some actual time in Thailand is higher on my list than it used to be; having spent 4 nights there waiting around for planes (and enjoying my pre-trip experience during this trip), I think I would take some time to minimally explore Bangkok if I'm ever in that neighborhood again. Ultimately, though, it's probably telling that the first trip I booked upon returning was a repeat of the southern John Muir Trail (which I did back in 2004). Even though that trip was the second most physically challenging thing I've ever done, my need for spending 15 days in the wilderness with very little was SKY-HIGH after ALL the people and the relative lack of exercise/activity on this trip. Hopefully, my poor old body will survive what probably is, at some level, a backlash reaction to Indochina's excesses. Having said that, the John Muir will involve eating, praying, and moving... albeit in very different ways.