

The Southeast Asian Diaries

2009-02-04

Arlanda

The journey has begun. I'm sitting in a café at Arlanda Airport waiting to board the flight to Ho Chi Minh City. The jitter of uncertainty has slowly faded into the background and I am calm and looking forward to the trip. I still do not really know what awaits at the destination, since the destination is not just one spot and a beach... I hope both Vietnam and Cambodia will be a blast.

Twelve more hours to go. Perhaps I'll write some lines on the plane as well, if bored, but for now I think I will close the lid and relax with a book and something to drink.

C'ya in Asia...

2009-02-05

Arrive at Saigon

11 hours in an uncomfortable chair takes its toll. After finding the way out of the airport and onto the waiting bus I felt more tired than I usually do. Perhaps it was because I didn't drink enough water on the plane, or because I couldn't even sleep for a few minutes.

I got to the hotel, checked in, had my bags brought to my room and collapsed on the bed. Woke up an hour later, had a shower and slept for two more hours.



Ventured out on the streets of Ho Chi Minh City (*it is so much easier to write "Saigon" so I think I'll stick to that name for the rest of the writing. Also – Saigon is a part of HCMC, and it was in that part of the city that I spent most time anyway*) to see the city and find some food. Vietnamese food is not the higher art of culinary cuisine... Some people love this food: I just think it lacks flavour. There are almost no spices in there... Why? It still tastes good, but not "great" as it could have been if just some spices were added. Ah well.

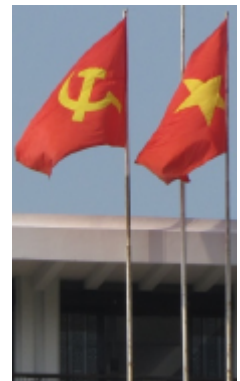
Found a Phô that served really good noodle soup, and they even managed to find the spice rack – I have to remember its location for the trip back.

Didn't have energy for much more than the short sightseeing and food-hunting, went back to my hotel and slept till morning came.

2009-02-06

Cu Chi

After a bus ride through the Vietnamese countryside I arrive at the famous tunnels of the Cu Chi area. This area used to be something of a resort for the Vietnamese people according to the propaganda from the victors. This was where the northerners came to relax and enjoy themselves. The countryside is still beautiful, there are lush areas and open fields.





The entrance to Cu Chi is through a tunnel where two persons in military attire (*I do not know if they are actually employees of the Vietnamese military or just dressed to look the part*) attach a sticker to my t-shirt to show that I have paid for my visit here. With a smile and a “Welcome Sir!” the young man points me forward and I walk up the slope into the Viet Cong village.

We joined in on an introduction to the story of Cu Chi and Viet Cong. We were shown a propaganda DVD telling the story as seen from the Communist Party. This is the first time that you realize that Vietnam is really communistic; hard to believe if you just walk the streets of Saigon.



The film talks about “The American War” as this is what it is called here. The film screams PROPAGANDA from start to finish - “American Killing Hero”, “Hero of Killing American”, “Great Hero for killing American”, etc, etc. I can't help but smile when I hear the rhetoric, even if the story told is cold and grim. Of course, the film only shows the evil done by Americans, nothing is mentioned of any Vietnamese part in the killing (*unless killing an American and being a “great hero”*) or torture.

After the propaganda DVD we walk around the compound looking at traps, hearing stories of the “great heroes”, trying to spot air-vents for the tunnels, the soldiers' quarters, weaponry, etc. It is fascinating to see how people with a cause can survive on so little and do so much from it. The ingeniousness...

Of course, at the end of the visit we are welcomed to crawl through the tunnels. I fold myself to get through the entrance and am met with the sight of a tunnel that seems to be carved out of rock. This is not so, it is clay earth. When it is padded hard and exposed to air it hardens. The tunnel is lit with small lights in order for us to orient ourself and not get hurt – the tunnels are clearly not made for tall westerners... I take the opportunity to crawl through the “longer” tunnel that is available. I am down on all fours and it is really straining on both muscles and stamina to finish the nearly 90 meters. The air is hot, humid and stale. I feel the lack of oxygen and all I can think of is the closeness of the walls. I am amazed at the fact that people lived down here...



I did not stop by the shooting range. Sure, it is fun to “burn off some steam” with an automatic rifle in your hands. But when the horrors of the Vietnam/American war fresh in mind the thought of

holding a rifle leaves a bitter taste in your mouth.

I say goodbye to the guide and head back to the bus. I am still amazed at the endurance, ingenuousness and determination of the people of the Viet Cong.

Cao Dai temple



On our way back from Cu Chi we passed the Cao Dai temple where we were just in time to witness their high noon mass. The Cao Dai religion is often seen as a cult, they live in a city in the city, they take care of their members but if you leave you are shunned. Their temple was spectacular – so many colours and carvings. You kind of get the impression that someone was very eager to fit everything he/she ever thought of in terms of religious items and symbolic references onto the temple, in every colour conceivable to man...

I have no idea why; but as I was shown the way up to the terrace, where visitors are allowed to watch the ceremony in silence, my eye caught someone in the crowd of the kneeling praying people – a young woman. I do not know why she stood out of the crowd. I was fascinated by this. What was it about her that caught my eye? I had to take her picture. There was something about her that separated her from the rest. I will never meet her, or talk to her, but I will remember that radiance.



We left before the ceremony was over to avoid the crowd. And frankly, the ceremony in itself was not much of a show...

Ho Chi Minh City Post office

In the afternoon I thought I'd get some stamps for my postcards – and what better place to do this than at the Saigon post office! Post office; let that word roll on your tongue for a while... You have almost forgotten what a post office is, right? Here in Saigon it is still very much alive and used. I couldn't find any other place to get stamps, and I saw no mailboxes around the city.



This is where you really get the feeling that you are in a Communist state. A good old fashioned post office that reeks of Control and Government! A row of phone booths at the entrance, I can see the history here – the lines of people that must have been standing here in order to make a phone call, an international call. There are now desks for different purposes. One for international stamps, one for domestic packages, and one for phone cards for international use, etc. etc. I stand in line and buy my stamps (*I did not see anywhere else in the city where you could get them*), put them on my cards and hand

them in at another desk.

I can help but get the feeling that the postcards will be screened and perhaps censored if The Party does not agree with my views on the world.



I joined a group of Swedes and two Vietnamese girls for dinner. We take a boat out on the Saigon River. The food is good and the company nice. On our way back to the hotel we collide with a group of young men. They are tall and fairly well built. They're wearing t-shirts that are a couple of sizes too small; pink and blue big letters saying "Made in Russia"; the classic Vietnamese ricepaper hats on their heads and a huge drink glass in hand. What a sight! They're drunk the way only young Russian males abroad can be. It is fun to see that I seem to find Russians (*or they find me?*) wherever in the world I am. We chat for a while and point them in the right direction of the club they're looking for.

2009-02-07

Mekong



An entire day spent on a boat – almost. We did some stops along the way to buy Vietnamese snacks, drinks and to have lunch.

It is a nice way to get to see a part of the country where you otherwise would have difficulties getting around.



As you travel along the river you see the mangroves' roots dip into the water, you pass everyday life as little houses are built on the river side. You get snapshots of peoples' lives. It is beautiful scenery that you travel through. You can feel the weight of the jungle coming in on the river. The lush green leaves are wonderful. The people always smiling, waving, cheering – and you return the smiles, the wave, the cheer. I don't think it is possible to see and meet all these people and not be smiling. It is infectious, and it is good...



We stopped for lunch at an old family estate. A really rich family, I must add. The house was large, with the entire lower floor dedicated to the shrines of their ancestors. There was a nice garden surrounding the building, with all kinds of fruit-trees, some of which I haven't heard and do not

remember their names. The food was excellent, apart from the small Phô with the really nice spicy noodles, fresh grilled fish and vegetables; this was the high point of Vietnamese cuisine. The fish melted in your mouth. Perfectly cooked fresh fish is fantastic.

It is hard to write down the thoughts and feelings from this trip; I should have done it as I was travelling along the river, as there were so many small distractions along the way. So many small things that triggered a longer line of thoughts that got interrupted by another small thing, which triggered another line of thought, which trigger ... You see what I'm getting at here.



I spend the evening walking around the city. I stop by a small Phô (*not the same as the first night*) to have dinner. The noodles are OK, the beer is cold – what more can you ask for? After a Gin Tonic (*we're in the tropics, or at least hot and humid places - We needs our quinine!*) in a small but lively bar, a few blocks from where I am, I am dragged along to a club called Club 6B by some people I just met there. I leave early (*around 2AM*) and make my way back to the hotel. It was a fun night.

2009-02-08

Presidential Palace and its bunker



The presidential palace of Saigon is a place of history. This is where the Ho Chi Minh army entered and took over South Vietnam after the Vietnam/American war. Walked around the place and absorbed the air of history.



The old equipment in the bunker was really cool. There is something special about old technology and big underground compounds are fascinating. The feeling of being under massive amounts of concrete, in something that can only be described as a man made cave.

Why is it that every “great” man in history that is leading a nation into war with rhetorics like “*We are winning*”, “*In a few days we will be victorious!*” builds such huge bunkers to hide in for the day when it all goes pear shaped? I guess they know from the start that it will never be that way – they are bound to lose from the start. So, check for bunkers at your leaders in case of war; if they have one, run for the hills...



War museum



The roughest part of the day...

A short history lesson, with a lot of propaganda (*of course*), before entering. I walked around but I could not bring myself to take any pictures (*except outside, of the machines of war and some re-enactments of prison cells*), but I ensure you all that it was truly horrible... Photos of women and children, mutilated and tossed by the side of the road. American soldiers torturing young Vietnamese soldiers. Victims of Agent Orange, second generation mutations. Some photos are stunningly beautiful in all their horror. Some photos are truly touching. Of course there were similar situations from the Viet Cong side towards American/Vietnam prisoners of war, but it was on a different scale.

I stop by a veteran on my way out from the museum. He is blind and only got one leg and one arm left. I cannot bring myself to ignore him, something I would probably have done had I met him somewhere else in the world at some other time, I give him a few dollars but it does not give me any relief from the turmoil

of feelings inside.

China Town

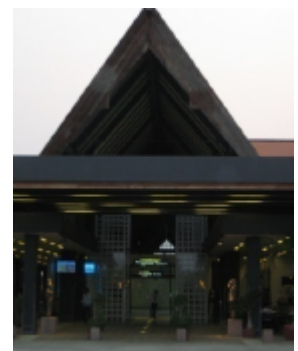
Of course I had to visit the China town of Saigon. I have visited China town of all larger cities I've been in, Saigon could not be different.

China town of Saigon is big, there are around 500.000 Chinese people living in Saigon. The commerce is vivid; the sounds mingle together to a constant buzz. I like China town. I buy some coffee here as the Vietnamese coffee is something special. It has a taste and aroma of chocolate and a hint of vanilla.

Off to Cambodia

Aaah... Off to Cambodia. This part of the trip is what I really have been looking forward to – Vietnam was just a bonus. Of course I was listening to Apoptygma Berzek's wonderful cover of Kim Wilde's *Cambodia* as the plane reached cruising altitude. And yes, Dead Kennedy's *Holiday in Cambodia* was also in the playlist.

Landed in Siem Reap and I must say this is the first time ever that I have seen an airport that didn't look at all like an airport. Fun!



I have read quite a lot about the immigration procedures in Cambodia, but I must say that they were all more or less exaggerated. Yes, you have to pay \$20 for the visa. Yes, there are 15 people working in a line behind the counter. Yes, they take your passport and you have to wait in another queue while they process your application. But no, there was no option for extra bribery (*"pay \$5 extra and cut the line"*). It didn't take half an hour – it actually took less time than the immigration takes in USA, and was much more efficient...

Bags checked out ok, arrived at the hotel with no incidents. I eat at the hotel and hit the bed early – tomorrow is AW-day! Need to be fully rested and ready for action.

2009-02-09

Angkor Wat



Today is an early morning start – up with the sun. Good night's rest. Good breakfast. Off we go! This is what I've been waiting for. This is why I came on this trip. History! Ancient times! Marvellous buildings! Great temples! Jungle!



the sun's rays with an almost blinding result. I wish I could have been there.

And what a sight it was. It is an impressive building (*or buildings, plural, in fact*). The walls, pillars, ceilings – everything is covered with details. And it is all so very beautiful. I cannot imagine how unearthly pompous and stunning it must have looked in its days of glory. It is believed that most of the temple was covered in leaf gold, reflecting



I guess words cannot describe how fantastic this place really is, the photos will have to tell the story. I will try to annotate them as much as possible.

Angkor Thom



We enter the old city of Angkor Thom and start at the Bayon temple. Here we get a chance to get closer to the stones, so to speak. We are allowed to reach the highest tower and wander around. There are countless numbers of towers here, each with a Buddha face in each cardinal point. The details are present here as well. The manpower and hours it must have taken to complete this... The Cambodian guide insists that it was all done by free will, but when pushed a little he says that perhaps the dragging of stones was done by “forced labour” - he will not use the word “slaves”.



Surrounding the city is a huge, wide wall with walkway. This wall has two different terraces that are special. One is the Elephant Terrace. The name is from the fact that the entire wall of the terrace is filled with elegant carvings of elephants, and at the main entrance to the terrace there are elephant statues. This was most likely the place where the king would sit and watch his people celebrate his glory, the place where he allowed the most brilliant of his people to kneel before him and receive gifts for their great deeds. The size of this place is amazing.

Some hundred meters further down the wall is the other terrace – the Leopard Terrace. Why this name I am not sure, as I saw no leopards here at all... However, this was the place of judgement, the court. This was where people came to settle an argument. And the justice system was rather crude. The two parties had to spend the night in a tower opposite the terrace, and the one who came out in the morning without mosquito bites was the one telling the truth. I guess we have come a little bit further no matter what you think of our justice system...

This was the last of the temples to be built in Angkor. This was the highpoint and the fall of the

Angkor Empire. When you look at the size of this you are not surprised – they must have built themselves to death... Instead of focusing the labour on producing food, they were forced to focus on building monuments. But yes, it is great and you can feel the grandeur breathing from the stones.

An uneventful evening follows. Eat at a local restaurant and head back to the hotel. Tomorrow is sunrise-time – we leave at 05:30.

2009-02-10

Sunrise over Angkor Wat



Got up early in the morning, felt like I almost didn't get any sleep at all. The ride out to Angkor Wat was chilly, the first (*and it turned out to be the only*) time I felt like putting on a light jacket to fight off the cold... When we arrived there were already hundreds of people there, with the same purpose as I – to watch the sun rise above the temple. It was a beautiful show. The sun rose with a wonderful red glow. I closed my eyes for a while and let the first rays of the morning sun warm my face. Soothing. I went back to the hotel to have breakfast.

Banteay Srei



The name “Bantey Srei” literally means “citadel of women” or “citadel of beauty”. That was not the original name, but got the name from the fact that it is of smaller size and all the intricate carvings. You can feel the difference here. It is not as pompous as the other temples. You do not feel small in the presence of this building; you feel welcomed and humbled.

In one of the places in the wall where there is a brick missing I see a spider web with such a peculiar web. I hope the photos



came out OK and show the details. It was almost a little spooky.

Ta Prohm

At last! The last temple on the trip. And what a temple!



Anyone who has seen Tomb Raider has seen small parts of this temple – The jungle temple.

Overgrown by trees, taken over by the jungle step by step, it sits there waiting for history to erase its grandeur. It really was amazing. When you see the huge trees that shoot up from the ruins you actually *feel* the time of old wrap itself around you. I walked around with a smile on my face, taking photos like some crazy Japanese on speed...

I made a wish in the echoing tower. Actually it was three, as the guide instructed was the right number of wishes to make. The echoing tower – this is a part of the temple where, if you stand in the alcove to either side of the room and smack your hand to your chest, you get an echo. A booming sound that travels up the walls and out at the top of the tower. As you do this you can make three wishes and they will be granted. But as with all Asian mystics (*religion, cult, mystics, whatever the name you like*) you cannot only wish for good things, for if you do then only bad things will happen... So you have to try to come up with things that can be either both good and bad, or add something bad but not really really bad to balance the scales to favour the goods.

Complicated? Confused yet? Well, what I wished for I must never say. That was also part of the mystics. So, I cannot even let you know if any of my wishes comes true, or else the gods will look unfavourably on me and smite me with their mighty wrath. Or something...



After a quick stop at the hotel to freshen up and have some lunch I head for the airport to get to Phnom Penh.

The trip was uneventful which, when being on a plane, is a good thing... We travel by a small propeller plane. Arrive on time, no baggage is misplaced, check in at hotel is smooth. I dip into the pool for an evening swim and then hit the streets to find something to eat. I end up on in a small family-run restaurant with only locals except for me. The food is good and the beer is cold. I guess this is the cheapest meal I've had so far. I tip a lot for the great service – they really tried to communicate, even though their English was really bad and my Khmer even worse. I think I got what I ordered, and I didn't get sick. Life is good.

2009-02-11

Tuol Sleng (S21)



It is hard to believe this used to be a school. Sure; the building in itself, if you remove the barbed wire and iron bars, resembles just any other building. As I walked through the rooms, with their different displays of what went on inside, I tried to find anything that could hint at this place being full of children once. Nothing. Not one

thing. No scribbles on the walls, nothing. Every trace of the original intent of the building was gone – it smelled of despair, hunger, fear.



I don't know what got to me most; the metal beds with just a thin drape over them and the crude shackles in a room with iron cast windows, otherwise empty except for a photograph of one of the prisoners. The prisoner on that bed, in that room, with those shackles. Beaten, tortured, on the brink of dying. Or; the room with photographs of the prisoners. All from the same angle.

Some were smiling; perhaps unaware of what was waiting in the other rooms. Others had a pained expression. Yet another with a rope around their neck. Or; the room with art depicting the atrocities, painted by one of the seven(!) survivors, and the tools used.



It all shook me up pretty bad. It felt like a smack in the face, a punch in the stomach. I sat down on the bus and took a couple of deep breaths. I was prepared for horror, but I guess you cannot fully prepare yourself for something like this.

Killing Fields



As if there wasn't enough with suffering and pain in one day by visiting Tuol Sleng I headed out to the Killing Fields. This was where the prisoners from Tuol Sleng were taken to have their lives taken.

The first thing you see when entering the grounds is the Stupa – a tall building with glass walls, inside it are skulls from the victims. There are 8000 skulls in there. It is a shocking sight. I thought I was prepared for this as well, I had seen the pictures, I had read the stories. But no I wasn't. I don't think anything can prepare you for the emotions that well up when you stand there and see it for real.



In silence I wandered the grounds, stopping here and there and reading the signs or watching the graves. There are still clothes in the ground; the graves have not been entirely dug up. There are somewhere between 8000 and 12000 people still in the ground. It is hard to imagine.

But there is one tree in the Killing Fields that is more terrifying than any other thing here, a tree with dark stained bark. A tree used for such horrible acts that my stomach turned and I could not hold back the tears. This tree was used to beat children to death. By gripping them by their feet and swinging them against the trunk of the tree until dead; or silent, and thereby considered “dead enough” to be buried. The dark stains are the discolouring from the impact and blood of all those children – somewhere between 5000 and 8000 of them. I cannot begin to imagine what this place must have been like during the time it was active. I cannot begin to imagine how any one, no matter if at gun point or not, can bring him self to committing these acts.



And this was just one Killing Field. Just one of the 160 places where these atrocities were carried out...

It was a silent bus ride back to the hotel after this experience. I guess we all had to digest this in our own time.

I eat at the hotel. I have no energy to find a place to eat. I just want to digest the day in silence, something inside me changed today but I am not able to put words to it yet. The food is not bad, but definitely overpriced.

2009-02-12

Shianoukville – relaxation...

After the last few days of travelling and all the impressions of the journey the beach of Shianoukville is a welcomed change. Five days of relaxation and pampering. Shoka Beach is the resort where I'm staying. It is a "gated resort", which means that the beach is private. I have split emotions regarding this – on one hand I am really looking forward to a few days without needing to see the poverty or having kids trying to sell me postcards or cheap plastic bracelets; on the other hand I feel bad for feeling that way. I have not stayed in gated resorts before; I always stay in "normal" hotels and use the public beaches. But this time I was advised to choose this option.

A few days into the relaxation I understand that advice. You really need the seclusion in order to digest it all. You can still venture outside the hotel area and go in to town. But while lying on the beach, just relaxing and reading a book, it is nice to be able to shut out everything else.

I spend the mornings on the beach, soaking up the sun and relaxing. During the afternoons I take a tuck-tuck into town and shop, eat, or just walk around. I go out for dinner as well. The people of Cambodia are welcoming and warm. I am deeply moved by their dignity and self respect, even among those who have nothing and must beg for means for food. I cannot help but falling in love with this country...

This vacation is definitely the most emotionally draining I have ever had, yet it is also the most rewarding. I got to see things I have never thought I'd see. I have met people with stories to tell, and with so much warmth in their hearts. I have been welcomed with open arms and smiles from those who have almost nothing. I am humbled to have met them all, and I hope some part of me have changed from these meetings. I hope I will return some day.

2009-02-18

Back to Saigon

Back to where it started - the same hotel, in the middle of District 1.

It was hot and humid. I took a walk to the market to find some wine to bring back home. After some detective work and really bad Vietnamese asking for wine (*at least I think that was what I asked for*) I was pointed in the right direction and found the aisle with at least two places that had a couple of wine bottles in their stands. I think I paid too much, but it was still not much when compared to Sweden (*SEK25 per bottle*), so I really didn't care. Almost everything was cheap in Vietnam anyway and I had way too much Dong left in my pockets. I headed back to the hotel and put the bottles in my bag. Had a quick shower and then shuffled off to a nice roof top pub. Aaah – one last relaxing evening before heading back home.