

CITIZENS OF XEE PRESENT:



**TRAVEL REPORT
SPZ-24K10**



*South East Asia
And Japan
Winter 2001-2*

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Hey Adventure Clubbers,

Last winter for about four weeks Frank and I travelled around Cambodia and Thailand, a little bit for business and a lotta bit for pleasure. Along the way I sent updates to all of our friends in the name of the Four Day Work Week, also known as Monday Adventure Club. What follows is a edited version of the e-mail texts along with photos taken along the way. Enjoy!

... This is our last day in Bangkok, in a few hours we'll set out for the train station to the Cambodian border. There's a little snag though, they close the border at 5PM so there's a forced layover in a little dust box of a town called Aranyaprathet. We'll find something to do. Last time I was there, there was a festival of some sort with Chinese opera. {WaaaAAAAaaaHHHaaAAHAHA} We went to dinner with Dahlijani on Saturday at this place called Hualampong food court. Don't let the name fool you. The place used to be in the Hualampong train station but after it left there it kept the name. They specialize in all sorts of regional cuisine of Thailand and there's an incredible house band that is almost the same as Ensemble Sub Masa, except they have a drummer instead of a bass, and the fiddle is Chinese style. Oh and they also trade off instruments, the cymbalom *Khim& *See what I mean about the diacritics? Player also plays the xylophone thingee and sings etc. And the accordion player trades off with the fiddle who also plays the Khang (harmonika thingee). Several people have asked about the smells, most of them aren't worth mentioning, this is an ASIAN city and as par for the course, the sewage system in not up to snuff. Couple that with Unleaded gas and anything with a motor being allowed on the roads and you get black snot syndrome.

While walking through Chulalongkorn University campus this morning we chanced upon a fragrant bush which I had to stop and breathe for a while, since the hotel is a mold palace. Over and out for now. Hope everyone is enjoying December in the best way that they can.

Dear adventure clubbers, last you saw of us we were getting ready to cross the Thai-Cambodia border, we were up at the crack of dawn and heading to the border in a tuk-tuk (a sort of hybrid motorcycle/red flyer wagon vehicle.) At the border Frank and I compiled a list of comparisons (contrasts.)

1- Thai: Roads. Cam: Dirt with potholes. (The Tuk tuk drops you off at the market and

you have to walk across the border where someone else will vie with everyone else to get your business to where ever you're going, and then you get stuffed into..oh wait I'll get there in a minute.)

2- Thai: ground is landscaped, trees, grass, and "Thailand" written in flowers, like those Disney Topiaries.

Cam: Garbage thrown into a festering hole of water.

3- Thai: the actual passport control office is an air conditioned building with lines for the different domestic/foreign passport holder with signs in Thai, English and Cambodian. Cambodia: (A new building since December 2000) Lines outside all jumbled together. There are two officers sitting behind the desk. You'd think there were two lines, but no, the first officer takes your passport (and almost it seems won't give it back) scowls at the visa that was issued in Washington DC, grills you for a bit and then gives it to the guy next to him who thinks about stamping it for a while and then gives it back to you.



4- on the Thai side there's a huge sort of "tariff free" market set up with eating places and a bus station, etc.

Cam: as you walk from Thailand to Cambodia you walk through a cement Angkor style arch and into a dust cloud that puts Peanut's pigpen to shame.

2-
For those of you with atlases*, please open to the pages of South East Asia and locate the small gnome shaped country squished between the two long kite shaped countries. The kite on the right is Vietnam and the kite on the left should be Thailand. (Ignore Laos for the time being). Now, using your X-files software, zoom in about 10x and look at the

**for those of you without, see the maps at the end of this publication.*

upper left hand side of Cambodia. You should see a dot with the label Battambang. That was our destination from the border. Most white folk crossing the Thai border on foot are headed straight to Siem Riep to see the ruins of Angkor Wat (more on that later) but we were headed off program, to the second largest dustbowl, oops, city in Cambodia. Battambang, literally “drop the club” has a little origin story which must be true, because there a big gold statue of the fellow at the entrance to the town. A charming colonial town that was owned at different times by the French, Siamese and now the Cambodians. Last time we crossed the border this way, we hired a car for ourselves, and swore not to do that again as the experience was... “rustic”. We apparently forgot because we took a car to Battambang again. Adventure clubbers, imagine if you will a standard small Japanese make pick up truck with a second row of seats in the cab. How many people would YOU generally drive in this car? One? Two? Maybe add in a dog? Okay. Not so here. Four in the back seat three in the front (one or two in the driver’s seat, and two in the passenger bucket seat...oh seat belt law? ha ha ha.) and in the bed, probably about twenty people and all the stuff they bought at the duty free market. I can only imagine how many people they’d squeeze into my sister Marlene’s Mayor of Truckville. Probably an entire village. Fun for all. Anyway, you know how big Frank is (6’4" and lanky); he takes



up two spaces without his backpack. So we paid for three spaces and tried to make due. The road to Sisophon was fairly paved and therefore not so much of an issue, but at Sisophon (which the locals call Swai) We were transferred into the driver’s brother’s truck. His brother had the “right permit” (read: bribed the right people) to drive

to Battambang. So we had to drive through the “bus station” three times, since the transport won’t continue until it is filled to capacity and then some. We drove by the same girl selling bread all three times, but the first time was a note worthy incident. She says (in Cambodian) to her friend while looking at Frank’s distinguished European nose: “wow! Look at the sharp nose on that one!” To which Frank replied in his flawless Cambodian “yeah, I have to sharpen it every day.” The friend disappeared, and the bread seller’s jaw fell on the ground. After she picked it up she was delighted to meet the talking monkeys and continued with an amiable conversation.

The rest of the ride was torture: cramped, and hot (AC wasn’t working so well). The only relief on that three hour leg of the trip was when they had to stop to change the front tire. The slow-down to purchase black beetle snacks from street side vendors carrying trays of these deep fried bugs on their head. They’re sold by the canful, and apparently you don’t eat the wings, as I noticed the floor of the truck was covered with crunchy black wings similar to sunflower seed casings. Other than that, we arrived in Battambang without incident. Nevermind the “National Highway” I’m not going to get into that now.

December 20th(?), 2001

The Talking Monkey Show: Frank visits a village somewhere outside of Battambang.

A few years ago there was a Cambodian restaurant down the street from our house in the U-district. We got to know the owner of the joint because we frequented quite often for tasty stews and sandwiches, so when we went to Cambodia in December of 1999 to escape the disasters of Y2K, she gave us the names of some of her relatives to look up in Battambang. Which we did. They own a telephone and mail store in the dusty town mentioned in the previous e-mail. Since most people in the country don’t have phones, or even know how to use them, they come into town, go to their phone store let the owners dial the number, conjure some spirits and get the desired person on the other end of the piece of plastic. (Cell phones are still rare in Battambang. Thankfully.) The mail business they run attests to the fine quality of the government run postal service in this country. It’s barely there. The people who own the store have a mailbox in Thailand where they pay someone to drive to and pick up/drop off mail every few days. Works for

everyone. So, the first time we met these people (I still don't know their names, most of the time everyone one just refers to each other by relationship: Bong: Older sibling; On (Pronounced "own"): younger sibling (with some gender specific restrictions); Ming: auntie; and Buu: uncle and so on, so these people we mostly call Bong. As I was saying, the first time we went to Battambang, we had to visit the tourist sites. There are several Khmer ruins outside of the city which one gets to on the back of a local's motorbike. They hooked us up with Uncle (Actually his name is Yeut, and since he's a central figure in the talking monkey story, we'll call him by his name.) Yeut took us to see the monuments and



got all chatty with Frank. That was two years ago. Last year when Frank returned to Battambang he again hooked up with Yeut who showed him the sites, played chauffeur and ended up bringing Frank back to his house in a nearby village to "meet the wife". Since I wasn't there, I can't elaborate too much, but Frank surreptitiously turned on the video camera and captured some of the conversations he had with Yeut and his wife in their village house. Those have since become famous pirated teaching materials for anyone desiring to speak Khmer. That's enough background information..

So, this year we go to visit the family who runs the telephone place and after pleasantries are out of the way arrangements are made to go to Phnum Sumpaeo with Uncle Yeut, where the legendary Niang Rumsay Sok and all her friends turned into mountains. (Giant footnote here, there's a movie version of this Cambodian folk tale which goes something like this: Girl meets crocodile. Girl raises crocodile. Grandfather teaches girl and crocodile magic. Crocodile turns into boy. Prince shows up on the island. Girl and Prince court. Prince leaves to marry princess. Boat full of royal family (including duplicitous Prince) comes sailing by the island. Crocodile/boy gets mad at



Prince for abandoning Girl and turns the sea all choppy. Prince gets mad, calls his fiancée to kill crocodile and girl. Prince marries fiancée and they live happily ever after...that mountain over there is the crocodile. This mountain here is the boat. etc.) Yeut re-tells this story as we climb up what's left of the boat. On top of this mountain is a Buddhist Temple (as is the case with most mountains in Cambodia) and a scary bat-smelling cave with a reclining Buddha, lots of prayer flags and a cage full of bones of dead people from when the Khmer rouge used the cave as a dumping pit. The reclining Buddha was built there later to keep the spirits appeased. There's a hole at the top of the cave where people got whacked with a stone and fell to their deaths in a pile about two-to-three stories down on jagged rocks (and I assume other dead people.) Icky.

After seeing the sights we go back to Yeut's house in the village. It's a humble wood and thatched number up on stilts, like most Cambodian houses. The family's living room is the space underneath. Houses are usually up on stilts to avoid floods during the rainy season, and to keep a cool breeze flowing under it the rest of the time, and probably lots of other reasons that I don't know. We hang out under the house with The Wife and Yeut and their couple of kids and all these other villagers come over to see the talking monkey. The wife goes out to the dirt path and says to the neighbors "Hey you gotta see the talking monkey at our house, ask him anything..." There were all kinds of young women with tons of dirty children all tagging along, a real poster for birth control. The children seemed frightened and curious. They all hung out in gaggles and whenever we walked around they would follow at a safe distance, to make sure we weren't biting the heads off of the chickens. Then they would go back to their kid games. Yeut sent his son or neighbor up the coconut tree to cut us down some fresh coconuts. "I used to climb the trees myself when I was younger," Yeut tells us. It's actually one of the scariest stunts I've ever seen. This person just scales up a smooth branchless coconut tree with a rope to lower the coconuts down from the top, and a machete to cut the coconuts off of the



This guy falls asleep in a coconut tree and starts to dream about all the money he's going to make selling the coconuts. He dreams he's getting richer and richer selling coconuts. Then he sends his servant to climb the tree to cut his coconuts and the servant falls asleep. So the guy climbs the tree to check on him and then he kicks the servant to wake him up. Just then the guy wakes himself up by falling out of the tree from his leg kicking in his sleep.

tree. There is no safety net and no ladder. And you can bet there's nothing like national health insurance to cover accidents like people falling out of coconut trees. (But there are lots of apparently hilarious jokes about it.)

They have a fruit farm of sorts. When it is harvest season for the various fruits someone comes to their house and buys it all up and drives to Vietnam to sell it at a profit. The coconuts, on the other hand, get bought by the local vendors and sold in the local market.

After what seems an incredibly arduous task of finding four perfect coconuts, the show starts winding down. The Wife shows us around the farm, pointing out different kinds of trees and telling us when they bloom and what kinds of fruit they have. "In a few months we'll have all kinds of fruits in our garden, but now there's only coconuts." At the head of the path into the garden the children are all gathered, keeping a watchful eye on us. When I arrived back at the head of the path I couldn't control my self and let out a good "BOO!" The kids all ran screaming bloody murder and stayed away from me for the remainder of the visit. heh heh heh.

Well, that pretty much wraps up the Talking monkey

show. Stay tuned for the next installment in which we'll give you a detailed account of the boat ride from Battambang to Siem Reap. We sat next to the guy who owns the gas station on the corner of Pike and Broadway. I kid you not.

December 28, 2001

Hey adventure clubbers, I promised the boat story next, but sorry for the silence, we've been held captive by Sokhary and Moeun who insist that we see the real Cambodia safely and from behind the tinted windows of their high class BMW. Just now we've escaped for a short while for a word to the outside. I'll tell you all lots more about this charming family in future episodes, but before then, the boat.

Remember your little map of Cambodia with the city of Battambang in the upper left hand side? Well there's a huge bladder of a lake between it and the next destination. There is also a road around the top of the bladder, and thanks to the Tomb Raider movie, there is now a pothole-less road between the two places, but that still doesn't alleviate the mode of transportation being the stuffed pick up truck, or the lovely dust of the tree-less surroundings. And it still takes more hours than the boat which takes about three.



There is one west to east boat-run across the north side of the lake every day. One comes in the opposite direction around the



same time so they cross in the middle. The whole edge of the lake is in a constant state of flux as are the floating villages located in that area. We take the boat down the river, along the northern edge of the Tonle Sap Lake and then into a subsidiary where we pick up a motor transport to Siem Reap. The boat leaves at about 7 AM, or when all the people who bought tickets the day before get there. This particular morning they were taking three small boats, one full of Cambodians, one with us and some Cambodians, and one with a tandem bicycle and about four backpackers. Glad I wasn't in

Oh a side note about this lake, the Tonle Sap (literal translation: freshwater), it is a very unique little thing. Zoom out on your maps for just a moment and locate the X of rivers that meets in the capitol city of Phnom Penh. One of those giant rivers coming from the North East of the lake is the Mighty Mekong (some maps may have mistakenly left of the Mighty part, but trust me, it's there.) This river starts in the Himalayas and every spring experiences not only torrential rains, but also glacial ice melt which carries tons of nutrient rich silt and mud down from the mountains and deposits it further downstream, thus creating the mekong delta on which we're sitting. Now if you look at that X of rivers again, you'll see that the other river which comes from the north connects to the lake. This is the Tonle Sap, and it is a very unique river in that its flow changes direction. When the Mekong is full in the spring it pushes the excess water north up the Tonle Sap river causing the lake to swell to about three times its size. During the dry season. (Which starts around November and goes through perhaps April) the water flows out of the lake and south into the Gulf of Thailand. Crazy, huh?

that boat. It turned out that the Cambodians in our boat were also from Seattle, and the father owns the gas station on the corner of Pike and Broadway. He was taking his son to see Cambodia for the first time. There were also travelling with some cousins. Altogether a lively bunch. Small world. Small world.

There are four terrains which the boat passes through, the first is along a river bank with pretty well established huts and fishing communities. People are out casting nets for the day or watching them, and we speed boats need to be careful because it's sort of like walking through a mine field. There are little plastic bottles attached to the tops of the nets which serve two purposes, first they are used to keep the net afloat, but also it's so the fisher people (really entire families seem to do the work out here) can find their nets, and so we speed boats can find their nets to avoid getting them caught in our propellers.

The second terrain we come to is flat flat flat. Like Buddha stepped all over the place. People here tend to live in boats and there are lots of little scrubby trees with their heads just above the water. This land becomes farm land when the flood waters go down, but people also continue to net fish. There are these crazy contraptions that Frank and I have been calling the shoe hangers. They are these huge lever thingees with three giant sticks making a triangle which holds a big fishing net, This part goes into the water, but the sticks, which are probably a good two stories tall are gathered together at the top and have tires and shoes hung from them as some sort of counter balance.



These flat lands give way to a third even more watery terrain where there are entire floating villages with Temples and hydro-ponic gardens. There are pathways among these crazy trees that grow with their heads out of the water. Since we've only been here during the winter months, I can't help but to imagine what these places look like when the water is at its highest and when it's at its lowest. We stop for a break at a floating store which has potato chips, beer, and Frank's vote for

the Scariest Bathroom ever. (He was afraid of losing the video camera, so there's no potty mouth documentation for this one.) Imagine if you will, a floating house with an attached floating box call the water closet. Now, the floor of this box is sloped so that the entrance end is higher than the back end where we assume one does their business. There's a hole cut in the lower side where the business will go sleep with the fishes, special delivery. It was scary for a boy to go in there, but damn near impossible for anyone choosing to squat, as the water level was above the floor. (In other words, the room was sinking ever so slightly.) The other sad but noteworthy thing at this floating store was their poor pet monkey. It was on a piece of chain about three



feet long and stuck under the house on a floating board with no nearby food or escape route. I really felt bad for the little wet guy. After the pit stop, we all piled back in the boats. (They acted as a caravan and stopped for each boat to catch up so we always knew where the other two were, one of the only safety features included in the 15\$ ticket price.) Soon after this we hit the open lake where we couldn't see any land . The waves got bigger and more choppy and I thought of my mother and how she would have died rather than make this crossing. But in the distance was the hill which we used not only as a marker, but as a destination. We crossed the lake and got to the landing spot without incident and met up with a young moto (think moped sort of small engine scooters) driver to take us to our guest house.

Okay, over and out Sokhary's coming looking for us to feed us again...

December 29, 2001

Greetings adventure clubbers, two days in a row we've been able to escape from program. Actually today is our free day, tonight we're going to see Suen Chendaa, a big pop star, sing. Until then our time is our own. naturally we had to get an e-mail checking in.

Now back to our story: ...the moto driver took us to Popular guest house where we've stayed the past two times we've come to Siem Reap. There's a lovely little wooden house across the street from the office where we had a room with private bath and a real

western toilet for a whopping four dollars a night. We took it easy for the rest of the day as the plan was to rent bicycles and go to the temples the next day. Which we did. Most people go to the temples to see the temples and ruins, Frank had another objective in this visit: to record a tour guide talking in Khmer about the sites for use in classroom activities, in the mean time I did some yoga on top of the little “mountain” know and Phnum Bakheng. (We had been here two times previously and could spend many more hours exploring this amazing place, so don’t think the brevity of this visit in any way means that Angkor is not interesting to us. We had limited time.) And when that was done we walked over to the Bayon, you know that one in all the pictures with all the heads? It’s actually quite beautiful and I like to imagine it in the 19th century when intrepid French men went there and described it as being in the middle of the jungle covered with vines and crumbling. As Henri Mouhot wrote “See Angkor and die.” Not so today, in fact it’s in the middle of no trees and the sun beats down on you unrelenting as you look at the carvings of Cambodian history from a variety of centuries. One of the interesting things about the Bayon is the number of pictures of everyday life: childbirth, chewing beetle nut, playing cards, dancing, carrying stuff, a medical office, and other everyday things. Perhaps someday four hundred years from now some explorer will come across some old super 8 films and an old mechanical projector and those films will become national treasures of some unknown nation.



After a day of bike riding and eating and looking at rocks we retired to our chamber. I decided to continue the trend of treating myself to cheap massage, so I went to this little joint advertising massage that was next to an art store. We had talked to the young women working there the day before, and they seemed on the up and up. Their brochure actually emphasized “LADIES ESPECIALLY WELCOME”. Sometimes it’s hard to know if the “massage” parlours are really just sleazy fronts for whorehouses. And I’m still not sure about this place even after having gone there. There were two levels, one was upstairs from the art store which sold post cards and paintings. The other place was next door to the art store. In the downstairs place all the little massage mats were lined up next to each other. Upstairs there was a big room in somebody’s house. There was a big bed, a little bed, a day bed and a massage table, along with a little couch/coffeetable



waiting area and a TV. Usually when you go to these places you get pajamas to put on, here they only had bottoms. Hmm. Okay. At least I got to practice my Khmer. I speak a little and the only way to try out the sounds to see if they work is to talk to someone who only knows “hello, how are you” and “please turn over”. We managed to exchange life details, not exactly stories, the massagist woman and me, and her two friend who came in to touch my pale skin and ask me questions. They were actually quite nice. One of the younger girls - who looked about 15

but claimed to be 23 - brought over a little container of hand sanitizer. You know the stuff you wash your hands with that has alcohol and evaporates right away? She brought over this container and said “I can’t read these (English) letters. What is this stuff?” And in my stumbling Khmer I (think) I said “Hand. Clean.” (Which could also be “Hand. Pretty.”) So the older girl asked a logical next question “can you put it in your hair too?” Hmm. “No.” After trying to find another word I stumbled across “anamai” which means something along the lines of “sanitary” so I think we’re safe now. I hope all the massage ladies in Siem Reap don’t start putting alcohol-based hand cleaner in their hair. Well, that, I’d have to say was my first interaction with the natives without Frank around. So maybe he’s not playing a terrible trick on me and those sounds he tells me mean something to someone actually DO mean something. Weird. I’ll stick to accordion to get a point across.

We took a plane from Siem Reap to Phnom Penh, so no more horrors of the road tales to report. Although seeing Angkor from the plane was a new and truly exciting experience. Having spent hours driving, biking and walking around the various temples and ruins, it was amazing to see just how geometrical everything is, and to think that this HUGE city was built between 8-13th century is truly awe inspiring.

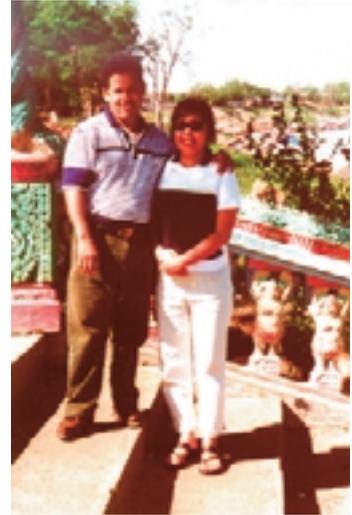
Okay, stay tuned for the next installment when we are captured by the Middle Class Cambodians and taken on a tour of the provinces.

Over and out from Cambodia,
Marchette and Frank

December 31, 2001



Hey Kids today we're writing from the Hippy Haven of Chiangmai in Northern Thailand. But I will now relate to you the visit with Sokhary and Moeun. Let me tell you a bit about this charming Cambodian couple. They live in a lovely little house with their two daughters, Lin and Len, two dogs of the inbred Chinese variety (well one is, but the other is a abused puppy patiently waiting to become stew.) And a kitchen elf. (Frank especially wanted to make sure that all of you Adventure Clubbers knew about the Kitchen elf. She is Sokhary's less fortunate cousin who seems to have suffered from polio or some sort of leg disfiguring disease. Although she is a full grown woman, she is very tiny and walks with difficulty. Sokhary calls her "a-doitch" which means more or less "midget" with not very nice connotations. You see, Cambodia is a Teravada Buddhist nation. That means if you were born into poverty or with a disfigurement or such, it's because you were not very good in a previous life. Those who were born into more fortunate circumstances were, therefore, better people before. Which means that those who are born into richness or power were probably really good last time around and are now being rewarded, right? So they can act corrupt and no one's going to call 'em on it, right? That's how it works in Cambodian Buddhism. Okay, so there's the Buddhist element to whom you can treat like shit and why, but there's also this other consumer element that Sokhary and Moeun explained at length while we ate ice cream in the resort town of Sihanoukville (Kompong Saum) while their BMW was conspicuously parked nearby.



First let me fill you in on why these people are our hosts. Frank works with Sokhary in the summer. He has hired her three or four times to come to America and work for about eight weeks and make about a thousand dollars a week to take back to Cambodia where she can live a life of near leisure for the rest of the year, which of course she does not. She also teaches Khmer to ex-pats in Phnom Penh. Ach, this gets complicated. So there's not only the merits of your past life, but there's this merit/point game in your present life that goes on in this branch of Buddhism. He who dies with the most merits will be reincarnated better next time, get it? So if someone does you a good turn, you have to re-pay them so they and you can get more merit. That's the best way I can explain it. So it's Sokhary's MORAL IMPERATIVE to make sure Frank is not lacking for anything while he visits, since he does her this huge favor of hiring her every summer.

Moeun is a pilot with Royal Air Cambodge, so he makes a nice salary too, therefore placing them well within the tiny but growing middle class. So, that's a little background on the BMW driving family who were our gracious hosts and who already had a program planned when we met them at the airport and saw their amazingly pristine car for the first time. Little did we realize this car would become our home on the road for the next five days. It was a dark blue sedan, with a 10CD changer in the trunk, remote controlled from the driver's seat. But best of all, the door locks were encrusted with faux diamonds. Too much. The program went something like this: "For the next five days we will show you a good time, we will bring you to Kompong Saum to the beach — it's beautiful white sand, better than that black sand beach in Thailand — we'll stay there over night, and come back the next day. Then you will have three hours to do what you want. Tuesday will be visit with Kheang (another teacher) day, Wednesday will be go to see the new bridge in Kompong Cham day, Thursday will be free, (except we got in trouble for missing lunch program) and Thursday night we will go to see the pop singers at the fancy restaurant." Friday they put us back on the plane and sent us back to Thailand. I'll fill you in on the details of this program in the next installment, which will include such highlights as: The woman who kept a diary during the Khmer Rouge years. A lunch time gun fight, and yet another massage.

Sunday was "go to Kompong Saum day", they left the daughters at home with the Kitchen Elf and the Soup Dog, while the four of us piled into the AC sedan and headed south on Cambodian Highway 4. There's an illustrious history to this road which goes all the way back to the Americans and the Vietnam era and all that. The Americans built this road. The first time they used the usual corner cutting methods, and it fell apart during the first year, after one rainy season. They were embarrassed enough that they rebuilt the road so that supplies from the seaport of Kompong Saum could get to Phnom Penh without effort. This road is so wide it actually can withstand semis driving in opposite directions without either one having to pull over to let the other one pass. This is not the case with most roads (Including the "national highways" to the north of the capitol.) We drove out past the Karaoke restaurants, past the hammock/corn stands. (That's where you go with your family on Sunday afternoons and buy roasted corn -- picked from the fields right behind you -- and eat it while lying around in hammocks, all for a pittance.) Continue past the corn stands, and keep going south. Continue past the corn, past the rice fields, past the stagnant mush field where people are attempting to grow stuff, and listen to Sokhary reminisce on the four years she lived under Pol Pot and had to transplant rice. She related the story of learning how to sprout rice seedlings, plant them, and then later when they're the color of a parrot's wing, how to grab them in bunches and transplant

them in neat little rows of muck. After the rice turned a golden “wheat” (for lack of a better word) color, it was time for harvest. Sokhary told us how you use the “gandiew”, a knife with a straight blade on one side and a curved handle (which used to be made of water buffalo horn), to grab bunches of rice, cut off the grains, pile them together, and then go back and cut down all the hay to feed to the cows. She also gave us a few new tales of survival under dismal conditions including how she and her friends used to steal little handfuls of rice seed and stick them in a piece of cloth and bury it in the field while they were working. At the end of the day they’d have a handful of soft rice to eat (even if it was the kind with husks only worthy of pig feed.) And that’s something people did to increase their meager rations. Another task Sokhary was assigned to do was to make fertilizer. get this, they had to go to the latrines with baskets and dig out piles of (human) shit and mix it by hand with dirt and straw from the fields before throwing it back on the rice to grow better. No wonder so many people died. By the time Sokhary came to a break in her stories of how to grow rice, we were to a place where she wanted to buy fruit. now, if you’ve never heard how to haggle correctly, then this is the woman you need to study with (although I fail miserably, almost every time I buy something.) She goes up to the seller and asks “Hey what’s wrong with this fruit, why’s it so small”

“It’s not small”

“Yes it is, look at the stuff she’s selling.”

“...”

“how much do you want for this?”

“50 cents”

“OOOHH! Fifty cents! It should be covered with gold for that price!!! I’ll give you ten cents.”

“No way this is good fruit!”

“When was it picked? Did you pick it yourself?”

“This morning, no, my sons did.”

“Okay, I’ll give you 25 cents, that’s my final offer.”

“Okay”

“and throw in a handful of those things too, and a spoon...” Well, something to that effect, there were some really bad cut downs for just a few cents saved here and there. Entertaining to watch. We were happily driving along eating our fruit and all of a sudden we’re in this “mountain” (hill) pass and there are all of these spirit houses lined up alongside the road. We slow down, and eventually stop, along with



everyone else driving in our direction. We had to get out and buy some incense to pay homage to Yay Mao. Okay I know this sounds like a Chinese communist cheer, but Yay is what you call grandmothers, and other old ladies, and her name just happens to be Mao, and she's a statue who sits in the mountain pass. She is a protector spirit of the pass. Everyone burns incense and prays for a safe journey through the pass and to the other side. A tour bus stopped just as we were pulling away, I was interested in seeing if everyone had to get out or if just the driver had to. That will have to remain a mystery.

We continued south to the beach, but before we we had to stop at the market so we could cut down a few more vendors away with several dead animals and of fresh fruit. This was interesting: about two pounds of giant shrimps and I were not eating) and then them to another person in the market



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really cauldron of boiling water. While the were steaming she grilled the girl the stuff, her friend who can't believe Frank is fluent in Khmer (go ahead anything...anything...) and the grand-the cook, because they had a funny Turns out they're "not real Khmer" book. They were Khmer, but they from a region in Vietnam known as Kampuchea Kraum — Lower Cam-



them in this filthy Shrimp cooking that ask him mother of accent. in her were

bodia — (I don't know if your atlases will tell you about that.) It's still a sore spot among Cambodians. They think they should get it back from the Vietnamese, but then again, doesn't everyone have a border to dispute? We then retired to lounge chairs on the beach under a cement floored-tile roofed gazebo to eat like pigs and take naps until four o'clock when the sun would be weak enough for us to be allowed to walk on the beach and maybe even get to swim. Kompong Saum also gave us volumes more in the life story of Sokhary, whose family emmigrated from Vietnam (hmm...no, really they're part Chinese and part Real khmer) in the early 70s and lived in Kompong Saum for a few years until they grew rich enough to move to Phnom Penh in 1975 where they got to live for three months before the Khmer Rougr kicked everyone out.



January 2, 2002

Hello everyone, we're in Chiang Mai Northern Thailand today, training back to Bangkok tonight, Happy New Year to you all. Last you heard we were on the beach in Kompong Saum, so I may abbreviate a part of the story to catch you up to this section.

Monday the 24th we left the beach resort of Sihanoukville and had the safe and scenic journey back up route 4 to Phnom Penh in the conspicuous BMW. Stops along the way to buy fruit and inspect the local bathrooms, (no more potty mouth winners until Kompong Cham...stay tuned for that one.) A curious thing happened in the car on the way home. Sokhary pulls out her make up bag (we women get to ride in the back, since Frank is a gargantuan by Asian standards AND he's the benefactor of summer job.) So she pulls out her make up bag and does the same thing the massage girls did, only she can read English. "what's this for? What's this? What's this for?" most of the stuff was easy: hairspray and skin creme, but the one amusing thing she pulled out of her bag was the Vaseline intensive care diaper rash creme. And my first explanation was "baby, butt, red..." and then with a little pleading, Frank gave a much more accurate translation. hee hee. So then we arrived home and the girls were in school, the kitchen elf was doing laundry (it was mid afternoon) and we, the upper middle class, drove the BMW *INTO* the house for safe keeping. Then we got out of the car and took our shoes off. No shoes in the house. This is Asia. Cars, okay, but no shoes. After that Frank and I went to check out what a Cambodian mall was like and by chance ran into another friend/teacher Frank works with whom he was going to contact. we set up our meeting for the following day. which is the story of Oum Sophany, the living museum. Tuesday December 25th is like any other day in Cambodia, nothing really different anywhere that we notice, breakfast program at 7:30, go about town at 8:30. One of the things Frank wanted to collect for teaching was an interview with this writer of modern Cambodian novels. Mind you, they're all true stories.

Now, let me describe to you Ms. Oum. But first a very short background: Ingrid is a former student of Khmer, she studied with Frank and Sokhary in 1997. Since then she moved to Phnom Penh and now runs, with her partner Daravuth, a very cool art gallery and publishing house called Reyum ("Cry of the Cicada"). She also wrote a not only readable dissertation, but an interesting one on the history of Cambodian art since 1915. She has made all kinds of friends through her work and research in Phnom Penh, and Ms. Oum Sophany who works at the palace is one of them. Actually Sophany was



one of Ingrid's teachers, and what a way to learn. A few years back Ingrid gave Frank a copy of one of Sophany's books, and a copy in translation which Ingrid did. It sat on the shelf until this past fall when Frank decided it might be useful for teaching in conjunction with an interview with said author whom Ingrid had described with the phrase: "she'll wear you out." And Ingrid is a high strung powerhouse of a woman. So after going to the palace and asking

for her phone number, Frank gave her a call and arranged to meet her for lunch on Christmas day. Kheang (the other teacher friend from the mall) and I were also in tow. Khean conducted the interview and, well, I observed so I could relate this story to you, dear readers. So we went to the palace to meet Sophany for lunch. She talked a blue streak and had several other novels which she had written, CDs on which she sings, and a videotape of an interview she did for some Japanese TV program. Frank politely chose one book and a CD and she agreed to lunch and an interview, as long as we're paying. So how's Indian? Fine. I know a place over near my house. yadda yadda. So we went to the Indian place and it took over an hour for the pakoras to come out of the kitchen. "What, did they have to go to the market to buy the flour...?" just about. But during our long wait for lunch we had plenty of time to chat with Sophany who told more stories of her life and asked lots and lots of questions. Meanwhile, I heard a fire cracker out in the street (this is asian style restaurant without walls. The front is basically a garage door that is open when the business is open and pulled down when the family who lives there, either in back of the store or upstairs, goes to sleep.) Seeing as it was Christmas day and all, I looked in the street to see if there was a fireworks display, but no, there was no fireworks, there was a panicked crowd chasing after two guys who were shooting guns at an unseen assailant. The gun toting guys were followed literally by a hundred men who are out of work, so they spend there days discussing politics and chasing bad guys. They run into the Wat (temple) across



the street and kept shooting. I think you MUST lose merit for shooting at a person inside a temple. A little while later, there was a reverse tide and all the unemployed men start flowing out of the Wat. The Cambodian girl who works at the restaurant relayed the story that the men were chasing a thief, but no one was shot or hurt. But the thief was caught. If you ever read the Phnom Penh Post or other news from this country, you'll know that oftentimes the case is that the perpetrator is guilty until proven dead by beating from an angry mob. Nevermind if he did it or not. Doesn't make America look so ugly when you see something like that. It really put the WTO Nike-wearing Starbucks-kickers to shame to see a real unruly mob. But fortunately everything calmed down before our food arrived and we had Sophany relate to us several of the 1001 Nights tales while we waited for food to appear. After the very tasty lunch, we went over to her house where she pulled out documents and documents, the woman saves more junk than a librarian. But considering the government got rid of everything for her in the mid seventies she still has a ton of stuff. Including the one dress she wore during the Khmer Rouge years, and the original copy of the diary she kept. You're probably thinking what I thought: "But I thought the Khmer Rouge killed all the people who wore glasses." Not so, according to several people including Sophany*: "As long as you did your work every day and had babies, they left you alone." So she wasn't afraid to keep a diary which is the source of the book she later wrote. We visited for a while more, looked at her stuff, Kheang interviewed her, then we all bid her farewell and thank you.

And that is the story of Lunch with Oum Sophany.

*It really depended on where you were and who was running stuff. None of it was a real picnic.

Still in Phnom Penh we have the day trip to see the new bridge, and the big singing dinner over the bridge. Then back to Thailand. Stay tuned for another installment.

January 3, 2002

Hello all, we arrived in Bangkok via train this morning, and in an attempt to catch you up on last weeks activities, I'm going to condense a little. This is an abbreviated account of going to visit hicks in the backwater known as Kompong Cham (Landing place of the Chams), this was just meant to happen for two reasons. First, we met a lady there a few years ago (the hick family as you will see) who had a little fruit juice stand near our guest house, we got to know her and her daughter who worked with her because we visited them each of the three nights we stay in Kompong Cham two years ago. We've been in touch by post since then, most recently she sent a touching letter after September 11th, in which she

conveyed her sadness for our Great Country. So Since it's only a two hours car ride from where we knew we'd be, I thought it would be nice to visit them. And reason number two is that Sokhary and Moeun who re-arranged their week to entertain us, had already planned for Wednesday to be "Drive to Kompong Cham and see the new bridge day" so there you have it. Okay atlas lovers, Look at Phnom Penh and then look a little to the north east of there and you'll see a tiny dot next to the Mighty Mekong river. That's Kompong Cham. Now the significance of that bridge is great, because if you look on your atlas, depending on how recent it is, you may see, if it's that detailed that there are only two other bridges over this gargantuan river. And they're both in Laos. There may also be one in China and Vietnam. But for a long time there weren't any (except for this really cool ancient bridge in China which was wiped out by a flood in the 1990's) which had a great effect on commerce and trade, as everything had to be shipped over the water by boat; And then



piled onto one of those questionable overworked Daewoo trucks. Needless to say, this bridge is a step toward international trade with the other nations of ASEAN. Kompong Cham is actually a charming old town with lots of decayed old French colonial houses. There's something (read French) akin to pictures I've seen of New Orleans and former French colonies in Africa. There are two hills** nearby with a history as well as some interesting ruins which is the reason we visited there before. On to the farmers' house: Ming (auntie) is a widow and has at least three kids, and they all still live with her in an unpainted cement apartment that looks as if it used to be something quite different before this family claimed it as their

***The story of Phnum Broh and Phnum Srai (Man mountain and woman mountain):*

In ages past women used to have to ask men to marry them. For some reason they wanted to change the state of affairs, so they threw a contest. It was decided that the men and the women would race to see which group could build the biggest mountain by sunrise. The women, being crafty, decided that some time in the early morning to send up a paper lantern into the sky. The men saw this and thought it was Venus, the morning star. And since the men's mountain was higher, they decided to stop working since there was so little time left. They went to sleep. Meanwhile the women kept working until sunrise. When the men woke up early in the morning they saw that the women had won. And from that day forth the men had to ask the women to marry them. The end. That's the women's mountain over there and that's the men's mountain. After Democratic Kampuchea that field in between was a burial ground and people came and looted the gold from the dead people. It smelled really bad.

floor and a row of framed 8 by 10 photographs of family on the wall. The faded color tv was playing Charlie's Angels last time we were there, this time it was silent. The elder daughter has one son who doesn't like to wear clothes, he kept ripping off the underwear she put on him so he could run around and stuff toilet paper into the fan. "He's just showing off for company" She has an apparently able-bodied husband who also sits at home and doesn't work. Especially now that the bridge is finished, there's not much in the way of blue collar work to be done around here. The youngest son is still in school. And the second daughter, Bo, who was selling fruit juice with her mom last time we visited is apparently the only one in the family who works now. Mom stopped selling fruit juice because she wasn't making much money. Bo, on the other hand, paints nails (Sorry unintended pun). She was gone during our visit --wedding season-- The average life expectancy in Cambodia is something like 53 for men and 58 for women. They are always amazed when they find out how old we are. After a nice little visit with Ming and her family, despite the political pitch of Mr. I don't work, we were off to look at the historical bridge. Which is well built in that Japanese funded way.

Dinner: The only time I have eaten a whole plate of fresh raw vegetables was when Sokhary (and the kitchen help) made this delightful Cambodian treat called Bunchaet. It's a sort of egg/crepe thing filled with meats and beansprouts, which you wrap in green leafy leaves and dip into tasty sauce. Garnish with fresh basil (sounds a little Vietnamese, doesn't it?) and cilantro and other green things and cram it in your maw until you have just enough room for a tasty fresh coconut, then call it a night. YUM!

The next day Frank had more recording to do with Kheang , so I went with Sokhary to this marvelous little place called "Seeing hands". I tend to shy away from religious conversations, so let me just say this: The Maryknolls, a sort of renegade sect of Catholics, are doing good things without preaching and conversion. Their big thing is just to help people. So they've set up lots of institutions to help the Cambodian people become self sufficient, especially those who would otherwise be on the streets, unskilled widows, and people with handicaps. In other words, a whole bunch of those people who must have been bad in a past life. This place, Seeing hands, is a massage center, run by Cambodians now. All of the masseuses are blind and are all trained in tradition Cambodian massage, which is NOT like Thai massage. (really) Cambodians don't climb on top of you and twist you into unnatural positions while repeating the mantra "no pain no gain..." This place is relaxing and enjoyable and an hour massage is only four dollars (never mind Sokhary, she talked 'em down.)

So everyone, when you visit Phnom Penh, you have to go to Seeing Hands for a relaxing massage. It's in the shadow of Wat Phnom, the temple on the bump (mountain?) for which the city is named. There's an elephant who works there, she's always there and seems to be well treated by her mahout. After massage I met up with Frank and we went to watch the elephant and drink some tasty fresh sugar cane drink. mmm. The rest of the day was spent in walking around the city and site seeing. The next morning we were to leave for Thailand. It was the grand finale dinner -- a special treat -- over the river in the crazy land of restaurants along the river. Where big pop singers do their shows and sing their guts out. Well, we weren't going to any old show we were going to see Suen Chendaa. She's a HUUUUGE pop singer here in Cambodia. And that's like being a movie star back home, since they don't have movie stars, since they don't really have movies (well, there are a few, but most movies are imports from Hong Kong and the west). Apparently there is a movie theater in the outskirts of Phnom Penh. Moeun ordered this dinner that never ends, first there were peanuts and drinks, then there was French bread deep fried in butter (more likely grease) ...horrifying, really. That was followed by a really tasty fish salad, and these little rolled up roasted beef thingees. Then came fish soup. A huge amount of food. This was the first outing on which the girls were allowed to come with us. They had a terrific time pointing out all these famous singers to each other and their mom. And we all had a swell time. (the singing was good too, but you can only say so much about sentimental ballads.) And this was our last big meal in Cambodia for this year. Moeun escorted us to the airport the next morning where we once again ran into our friend who owns the gas station. They were flying back to Seattle pronto, as his son developed some kind of kidney infection. Eek! That's all for tonight, Stay tuned for future installations which will detail -travelling weekend in Thailand. -the lovely drag cabaret -The traditional western New Years and much more.



A message was composed on January 4th detailing the above list, but apparently it never made it to sent-mail. It is apparently floating in that limbo of e-mails that are deleted before they see the light of day, the following was written later that same day assuming that the last mail was already read.

Januray 4, 2002

In the last installment I said that nothing noteworthy happened in Bangkok while we were there, but that's NOT TRUE! First, we met up with the famous Ingrid Muan of Reyum fame, remember back to Cambodia and the author lady...Ingrid is the former student of Frank. She was passing through Bangkok on her way home (Phnom Penh) from the US where she was visiting her family. Anyway, as any somewhat intelligent person with an active brain might do, she HAD to come into the city to go to the bookstore and stop at the German grocery store for some western goodies to bring back to Barbaria. She suggested meeting at Starbucks. Eerie. They are exactly the same the world over, from the wall paper to the music they play to the smell. I find it disconcerting. And if that weren't enough to skim over, we also discovered an ENTIRE MALL (four stories) completely devoted to gay fashion. Can you believe it? At first we were looking for a shoe store that Frank read about in the Bangkok Metro magazine, but several garments caught our eyes as we walked through the mall, and now Frank has added a few more gold shirts to his collection. This description fails to convey the gaudiness, the poppy music, the throngs of "festive" men, young and old, shopping together, picking out the latest music and stopping to dine in the 50s retro theme restaurant. And lest we forget: the best adventure we went on during the last Bangkok visit was to the Forensics museum on the other side of the river. We stopped at Wat Arun, which is a beautiful old temple on the west side of the Chao Praya river (which runs through the middle of this fair city). The temple



is covered with little dishes which sparkle when the light hits it right, and looks to me to be made of glycerine and sugar, like in the dinosaur cake book...And a short boat ride north of there is the difficult to find Forensics museum which is so gorey we HAD to videotape it for you. It contains all sort of body parts preserved in yellowing formaldehyde as well as about four completely whole mummified famous(Thai) serial killers, murder weapons, skulls of dead folks with descriptions of what happened, and lots of preserved dead

babies with a variety of birth defects. Very gross.

So now you see why I need to apologize for my shoddy reporting, right?

Let me continue with a little info on Surin, the town in the North East we were headed for on the train. We arrived just around sunset (which since we're so close to the equator is around 6 pm year round!!!) Our guide book, and apparently several others rave about this tour guide named Pirom who runs a little guest house near a "lotus pond" (actually a bit of the moat from the old city.) The first night in town we stayed at Pirom's guest house. He and his wife Aree are very charming, but there were about ten people and one Asian style bathroom full of mosquitos. So we found nicer accomodations the next day. We did, however, join up for the half day tour Pirom was leading the next day, to the silk village, the basket village and the elephant village. It was all very interesting and laid back and not like being herded here and there with a specific schedule. You see, what the guide book doesn't tell you is that Pirom retired last year, before which time he was a social worker in the area, and had been for thirty years. So he personally knows lots of people and he's very charming, and genuinely likes showing people around. (70 percent of the people in the area are those ethic Khmers previously mentioned, so Frank would talk to them and make friends while Pirom was busy telling us other things and visiting with everyone). Every old lady we visited Pirom brough a bag of Betel nut and all the fixins so they could chaw to their hearts content and have the blackest teeth ever seen. Which is exactly what they did. Surin is on a plateau, and since they're in Thailand, all the peasants are rice farmers, but the trouble with the plateau is that you get water during the rainy season, but it dries up quickly, so there's only enough water for one crop of rice before the drought season, so during the off season most of the women take up silk making. We wandered from house to house where people were tending silkworms, boiling cocoons for the fibers, and spinning, and then dying with those crazy tie patterns and weaving into beautiful silk wraps and sarongs.



I ate a silk worm.

It was on purpose. At the house where the lady was boiling them and pulling the fibers out, she offered us the freshly boiled worms, which are considered a delicious snack around those parts, and actually they are. They taste almost identical tocorn....If I had my eyes closed I think I would have thought it was corn, same texture, same popping when you bite it. Very odd. But I'm still not brave enough to taste the

spiders, Sokhary says they taste too much like cockroach anyway. You know that smell of cockroaches, right? That's what the big spiders smell like too. EEEwwwww.

We enjoyed the half day tour so much that we elected to join the day-long excursion the next day which went south from Surin to a road along the Cambodian frontier border. There are several Khmer ruins in that area as well as a little shelter where Pirom likes to stop and dish out an incredibly delicious lunch his wife packed for us. Worth every penny.

So that's the short version of Surin. If you have a chance, go there and go on one of Pirom's tours. You will be very happy. Really.

After Surin we took the train back here to Bangkok and have been dealing with chores that I've been putting off until the last minute. In the wee hours I'll be off to Japan. Stay tuned Adventure clubbers! To catch you up on the missing missive: Chiang Mai New Years, was pure Thai fun complete with the Solid Gold Dancers' version of the 80s hit "The Final Countdown" and big big Chinese fireworks. The next day we went up the mountain to see the (what ,else) temple at the top. We also went to see a drag queen beauty pageant in this converted parking lot. It was an all night affair with queens from all over descending upon Chiang mai and lip synching to Pointer Sisters' song. These were some of the most glamorous women I've ever seen. After that we took the overnight train back to Bangkok. I wrote for you an elaborate and praising description of the lower sleeper bunk, and a not so praising description of the upper berth. But second class aircon sleepers are A-ok by Xee. So if you're travelling in Thailand try it some time. And then I mistakenly said not much happened when we were in Bangkok. I went ice skating at the World Trade Center while Frank was teaching. But then I told you every thing else. Except that we splurged on a 30\$/night palace with hot and cold running water and a bathtub.

Then came the geography lesson about Thailand, if you look at its kite like shape you see Bangkok right at the beginning of the neck/tail and two lobes to the north, the one on the left being Northern Thailand where Chiang Mai is, and the one on the right being Northeast Thailand, or Isaan. Where Surin is. And as I mentioned once before, NE Thailand is on a plateau, with the escarpment on the east/south forming a natural border with neighboring Cambodia. In the height of its power the Khmer empire seated at Angkor ruled over these territories leaving behind it lots of Khmers long after it's decline and fall. In fact they're still there. What is interesting is that they don't write in

Khmer but they speak it. And they try to approximate Khmer words with the Thai alphabet which doesn't exactly have the same sounds, so some weird things happen. Similar to that Madonna interview conducted in English translated into Hungarian, and then back into English that ran the gamut on e-mail a few years back. Well, maybe not that bad.

And so that's the summary of what was deleted this afternoon.

Farewell citizens! Tomorrow I will be visiting David Friedmann, our Emmissary in Japan. And Frank will be staying here in Sout East Asia. He has vowed to continue to faithfully report on the events and individuals he witnesses in his travels and experiences, until the first of February. At which time he will return to Seattle and we will prepare the full Audio-visual extravaganza for you educational pleasure.

___ JAPAN ___

hey adventure clubbers,

Just thought I'd fill you in on the adventures in Tokyo with our good friend Dave Friedmann.

Leaving Thailand by air: Either the Thai are being super careful with the current rash of air travel trouble, or they just like looking through other people's stuff. I think it's the latter. You know in the airport now, how they usually pull over a few people getting on the plane for a spot check of their carry-ons? Well, they did it to everyone on my flight, and checked us all with that hand held metal detector. and made us take off our shoes so they could weigh them. So wear clean socks. I had all these bizarre things in my carry on: the kind of presents I get are like cheap notebooks with misspelled things and weird English like "Musical Pig", a crude device used to scrape coconut meat out of a shell, and a clock with Thai numbers and a picture of king Chulalongkorn (really classy) This drew our attendants attention, since it had a battery and was ticking. oh no! A bomb disguised as Chula! After a thorough checking and removal of the battery she let me take it back. but remained suspicious when she pulled out a bunch of Thai movies on VCD with no English subtitles. Why would you want movies you can't understand? Those of you who saw Nang Nak and /or Bang Rachan at the Seattle Film Festival last year know that the story is pretty easy to follow, how hard is it to know that the Burmese are evil and we must fight to the death!! hmm?

So anyway, on to Japan:

I landed at Narita and called Dave who told me to catch the Narita Express to Tokyo Station where he would meet me. **YOU CAN TAKE THE TRAIN RIGHT FROM THE AIRPORT!!!** (A sign of civilization.) Not only is there more than one train but there are several depending on the amount of time vs. money you want to spend, the Narita Express is the fastest and most expensive at 1 hour exactly and about 30 dollars American, but the seats are assigned and the drink girl comes through every so often. There are slower commuter trains (I took one back to the airport for about 13 dollars and it took 86 minutes exactly.) Amazing. Just as he said he would, Dave met me right at the station, at car number eight. Disclaimer: I apologize in advance to you Dave, and everyone really for any of the misspellings and slightly wrong place names. That evening we went to a neighborhood called Ichijoji for dinner. In a little open front restaurant place we ate chicken on sticks and shared beer. The waitress is apparently famous. She wears a wig and seems to have been working there since before all of us were born. There are other regulars there and Dave says the people are so friendly, when he sits at the counter the person next to him always starts chatting with him. We were at a table. Anyway, there were these two rock stars working behind the counter, maybe washing dishes, I don't know. All I saw them do the whole time we were there was stand there, look cool, and smoke. One had bright blonde hair and the other had teased hair and a bandanna, but this description fails to do them justice. hmm. Then we walked around the lovely neighborhood and nearby park before going back to Dave's where he showed me some of his great slides. Our Dave has become quite the photographer. He even has an underwater camera and a scuba license so he has these incredible underwater pictures from (excuse me, I think they're from) the Barrier Reef off of Australia, or Palao or somewhere in those south seas. Dave lives on the west side of Tokyo, for those of you with maps of Tokyo (Or you can go to Google and search on "Tokyo train map" and the first hit is just that.) it's called Nakano. There is a park on



his street exclusively for cats. i don't think even people are allowed there. Certainly the dogs aren't. How different from Seattle can you get? Dogs are allowed everywhere here. Pity that. On the Tokyo map you'll find Nakano in the upper left hand side. The next day we went to an older city just outside of Tokyo called Kamakura where the Shoguns set up their rule in opposition to the Emperor in the 13th century, We took a lovely rickshaw ride with an enlightening man who has been pulling rickshaws for a





job for a while. Before that he lived in New Jersey, so he spoke East Coast English quite well, that was how he got our attention and business in the first place, I think. In Kamakura there are lots of temples, both Buddhist and Shinto that are part of the selected tourist things to do, as well as the Daibutsu, AKA Big Ass Buddha. Made of bronze. Story has it that a tsunami wiped out the temple that used to be around it and left the Daibutsu exposed to the elements, but he doesn't seem to mind. He's still meditating. We had tea

in a hoity toity place on a little lily pond and there was one of those famous Japanese Hi-Tek toilets in the bathroom! WOW, what a change from pit in the floor. Heated seat for starters, but this one didn't have the extra flushing sound like some of them do, for when you want a private moment without disturbing those around you, in public? Hmm. We watched the sun setting by the ocean. The rickshaw puller told us we could see Mount Fuji from this certain beach, but we didn't see it, so we went to sit on the sea wall where we had some snacks, and I drank a real Pocari Sweat just to see how it tasted. Verdict: it didn't taste like sweat. There were young surfers trying to catch waves in a part of the ocean where no waves live. So everytime one of them actually got up on a board we were all excited, but it never lasted more than a few seconds. And they all stayed in the water, hopeful, until the sun fell behind the mountains, which materialized out of no where. When we walked to the beach there were no mountains on the horizon, only smog. But after the sun got low enough there were mountain outlines. And so as we got up from the seawall and went back to the path, there it was! Mount Fuji! Bigger than life. And Dave starts singing Donovan "First there was a mountain, then there was NO mountain, then there was..." "I get it now" he says, "I finally get that Donovan song." It's true. I wonder if Donovan has ever been to Japan?



Stay tuned for part two... Marchette (for Marchette and Frank)

Now then, we left at sunset and headed for the train back to Tokyo. This very nice

woman made sure we got on the right train, speaking Japanese to me the whole time. She was out buying photos of surfers which she showed to us. Fortunately, Dave understood her and was wise enough to sit in the middle when we got on the small train (from the beach to the bigger train back to Tokyo).

Once she was sure we would get the right train back to Tokyo she let us go. How kind. The day before I had seen through the windows of some of the sushi bars that they have conveyor belts always full of sushi. It's like heaven, you take a plate of something that looks interesting, and another plate appears. Conveyorbelts of sushi! Everyone sits at a bar around the outside and the sushi chefs stand around inside of the belt, each with their own sushi station. You can order things like Miso soup wich aren't on



the belt, and they instantly appear in front of you when you're not looking. I wanted to go to one of these places! I mean, how could you go to Tokyo and NOT have sushi!?!? (OR drink green tea...?) So Dave had a place in mind, it's located in Shibuya, a shopping district. Imagine if you can Times Square on Steroids with no cars. Or maybe there were cars, but only on a few of the bigger streets and the crosswalk lights are long so everyone can get across and look cool at the same time. In this area is the World's Busiest Starbucks, for whatever that's worth. I didn't go in to make sure the decor wasn't altered by those aesthetically aware Japanese. Although it could have been, it was at least two floors tall and the entire outer walls were windows. hmm. Anyway Shibuya is where this very popular conveyorbelt sushi restaurant with a perpetual line is located.

Rules posted on the door "You must eat at least 7 plates and no sitting around and chatting, you're here to eat." (Frank you'd love this, eat fast and eat lost of sushi...)

Now, I feel like a complete rube upon arriving in this neighborhood where everyone is particularly well dressed, has the coolest cell phone and all that. My jaw was just slack from the moment I stepped out of the train station, and I'm sure a verbal description fails here. There were those giant TVs on the sides of building, and all sorts of light displays, and gigantic stores and tons and tons of well dressed people (Did I mention that people wore nice clothes?) Okay, so back to the sushi place, we finally got seats at the counter after standing in line and then getting inside to the waiting bench. There were these little hot water faucets every few seats so you could pour yourself tea. The teabags, soysauce, chopsticks etc are all in these neat little racks between you and the conveyor belt. I tried to pour myself some water for tea exactly the way you're not supposed to do it. I pushed the button with my finger instead

of with my cup, as the icon so clearly indicated. But no problem, right? One of the several floating sushi seater/waitresses quickly points out the correct way to pour tea and I'm saved. But once again, I can't stop feeling like a slack jawed yokel. Then, after a very satisfying meal we got up to leave and I pulled another yokel trick. I tried to open the door wrong. But wait. It's a glass door and it slides, you know like all of those space saving efficient doors they have, it SLIDES to the left. But there was a rectangle where a handle would be on a "normal" door, and it said (in English) "PUSH" so you push the door, right? Wrong, you push the button so the door will open itself. Whoops. After dinner we played a nice version of Marco Polo with cell phones with A colleague of Dave's named Brian who was supposed to meet us in Shibuya. "where are you" "I'm near the Kenwood sign" "I can't see the Kenwood sign" "I'm across from Starbucks, no, same side as the Kenwood sign" (meanwhile we're about six feet away from each other with tons of people in between.) Okay I'll look for the Kool sign and go stand under it. (The Kool sign was just feet away around a slight corner.) BINGO! So there we met Brian who was hungry and desirous of beer. But this is the shopping neighborhood so there are not tons of places to eat. After walking in circles Brian said "Wait, I used to work around here, I know a place." and led us down an alley and into a basement which had the feel of a Munich beerhall, but with much lower ceilings. There were people for miles at long wooden tables drinking and eating. We got a seat in the corner and ordered some food and drinks. (Remember, Dave and I were severely stuffed on sushi at this point, so we just shared a little sake.) At the table next to us were a bunch of secretaries playing Girls Night Out. It was a Friday. Later, we found out that they were all friends from high school who get together once a month for dinner and fun. One of the girls drew attention to herself not with her very blond hair (remember they're all Japanese) but with the shortest skirt ever. At one point she was giving her friends shoulder massages, and Dave (Who has become, according to Brian, a babe magnet.) turns around and asks her if he can have a massage too. And she obliges. Eventually we met all of the women at the other table and were invited to join them, after which a crazy smattering of Japanese and English goes around the table. Five out of six of the women studied some English at school and both Dave and Brian are pretty good with their Japanese. So mostly the English was for my benefit. Each of the girls introduced themselves with "My name is" and then "but my nickname is" They were shocked to learn that I didn't have a nickname, only a name. (Unless you count mom calling me horse, but let's leave that alone, shall we?) To make a long story short, it was revealed that two of the girls are really big Kiss fans. In fact, when Kiss was in Tokyo last year the small girl, Aoki, gave (Ace Freeley?) a bunch of ketchup packets. (It is never clear why she gave him this thing. But it's funny to think of these over the hill

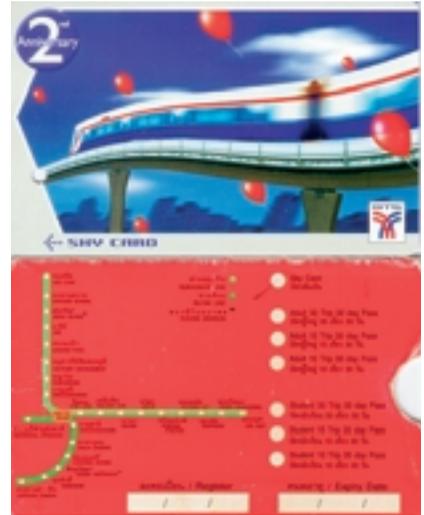
fake-o rockers receiving packets of ketchup from some deranged Japanese fans, wouldn't you say?) When the restaurant closes it was decided that I should experience the most Japanese thing of all. We went to a karioke club. two of the women went home instead: one is married and the other was tired. We were left with the two Kiss fans and the short skirt. So off we go to karioke.

In Japan they have small rooms for you and your friend to sing along to pop classics (American and Asian) in which you are encouraged to drink a lot. (Mind you I stopped with the Sake hours ago, but most everyone else was still slurping up beers, except Ketchup girl, who chose to be the mistress of picking the songs out of the book. So you get a big book with all the songs arranged by title or by composers or by genre and all cross referenced in strange foreign ways, and a five digit number that you press into the remote so the song will play on the TV, and then there are two microphones so you can all sing even louder. But the great thing about the microphones is that there are different effects on them, lots of reverb choices and even a weird vocoder thingee that somehow was on when Aoki (Ketchup Girl) sang some song about sailing. Amazing. So we're there for what seemed like days to me, but I think in reality was a few hours. At any rate, it was later than the trains, so we had to take cabs home, the non-ketchup Kiss fan whose name is Fumio lives very close to Dave's place in Nakano. And Brian, who is extremely inebriated and lives very far (in Ichijoji) also ended up staying at Dave's. ** Side note: Let us now mention that not only did he manage to exchange cards with Short skirt, but Dave got Fumio to put her cell phone number into his phone and then he tried it out to make sure it worked. Sly Dave, sly. I think Brian's claim about Dave's babe magnetism may be true.** Anyway, before we made it home Dave needed to say to the nice driver (In Japanese) "Please pull over, he's sick." And you've never witnessed such efficiency. Pulling over at red light, opening the door, sickness, red light changes, we're on our way again. WOW. So the four of us, Fumio, Dave, Brian, and I were all in the same cab, which made it much cheaper to get home. We all got off at Nakano station where it was a short walk home for all. To get to Dave's you follow the train tracks, or for a more pleasant walk you take the route by the Secret Stone and by the Cat Park. There's also a sento in the neighborhood, but I didn't have a chance to go to it. A sento is an old fashioned public bath house, with hot baths (hot tubs) divided for boys and girls. They're only open later in the day, or I would have gone on Saturday morning. Oh well, now I'll have to go back. Saturday, my friends, is the day I began what seemed a never ending journey. But before I left we had time for one more neighborhood. Go back to your train map and look toward the middle and slightly to the west and north. To the west you'll see Shibuya where we ate sushi the night before. And today we went to

Shinjuku; one of the places where the kids in their amazing get ups go mostly on Sundays to stand around and be seen. Shinjuku also has beautiful tree lined streets with lots of expensive shops and lots of people shopping. We walked by a herd of girls all standing in a block/line apparently waiting for something. So Dave in his non-assuming way went up to the guard and asked what they were waiting for. "They're waiting to go to Andy's (or some standard western guy name)." "Oh, is "Andy's" a new store?" "NO, it's old." "I see, thank you very much." "You're welcome very much." So it would seem Andy's is some store where teenage girls wait in line until the doors open on Saturday afternoon. That's the scoop from Tokyo. As i mentioned before, I took a slower train back to the airport, which took exactly the 86 minutes that is said it would. And there were no snags at immigration or customs, there were never more than two people in any line, thanks to Japanese efficiency. The flights were nothing noteworthy, except that perhaps I mentioned to you at the beginning of this story that American Airlines has made cutbacks since September and the Tokyo-Seattle flight is one of them. So they had me stranded in San Jose upon return. oh no no no, that will not do I told the lady on the phone (While confirming my flight before we left in December) "Well, the best I can do is reroute you through Dallas." Okay so it added a few hours to my travel time, but the bump up to Business made it worth the experience. It also made me continue to feel like a rube, not knowing how to get out the TV or the tray table, or how to eat with real utensils and being given a choice of foods and warm rolls and endless DECENT wine! (The Fat Texas Businessmen on either side of me were drunkards everything they consumed had liquor in it, including their morning juice, evening coffee, etc.) This also meant I had to go through customs in Dallas, so, i wasn;t even gonna take a chance with the (now, don't be offended anyone, these shirt were very funny) Bin Laden/George Bush t-shirts they were selling in Thailand. Some were distasteful, but there was one that was so post modern: the heads of Bush and Bin Laden with fighter jets in the background and no words, they both look like heros working together. Other shirts weren't so tasteful. Anyway, no chance of them being amused in Texas, so I didn't even want to bother. As it turns out they were all pretty nice, and didn't even look in my stuff, even though there was so little. That usually makes them suspicious. And tomorrow, I go to work. That's the end of my section of the Monday Adventure Club Winter Tour Report. Stay Tuned for more Stories from the other half —



This is the first of my missives for to the faithful. The skytrain (an ultra-swank hybrid lightrail/monorial—DUH, Seattle...) is returning from the weekend-only Chatuchak Market. Chatuchak offers acres of everything for sale you could imagine, and plenty you couldn't, at rock-bottom prices. Someone has thrown up in middle of the car. Nobody is sitting around there. One or two stops into the trip, the train carries at a station. A masked, uniformed cleaning woman gets on. She quickly yet thoroughly cleans up the offending mess. She then wisks the slop off the train in a plastic bag. EVERYTHING goes in plastic bags here, except they're generally more stylish than the bags everything goes in in Cambodia. The vomit-wisking bag is standard issue hefty-green, however. And we're on our way.



The trip continues, adventure clubbers, still exciting but lonely due to the absence of one half of the team. I will do my best to carry on and observe and report in the manner to which you have all become accustomed.

Over and Out for now,

Elephant Number Two

This week is stay-in-the-city week, and so far the high points have included buying a basketfull of beautiful fake plastic Asian fruit at Chatuchak Market to use as teaching materials for Khmer. I've also been exploring the crazy thai dance clubs. I found out from a taxi driver last night on my way home at 2:30 am that everyone thinks I'm gay due to the way I dress. This is apparently why the prostitutes usually ignore me. And I've discovered Thai massage. It's truly an amazing thing! They walk on you, sit on you, pound you and knead you with their elbows, knees, shoulders. And since everyone at my regular massage place is from Northeast Thailand (a poor area where many of the people speak a dialect very close to Lao), I've been able to get lots of Lao practice in.

My week in the big city is now rolling to an end. Tonight it's an overnight train up to Laos, where plenty of new adventures await. For now, a few musings on this crazy city and its wacky inhabitants:

The Bangkokians never walk, they amble. Which can be maddening sometimes for the tall westerner used to purposeful strolling. New Yorkers could go nuts here! The one exception to ambling is when they're getting on or off a means of transport (like the Skytrain). Or "queuing" in a "line". In such cases they are ruthlessly self-determined and push, shove, yank, whatever it takes to reach their objective. And whoa to whomever gets in the way. The Skytrain is a good example. Its designers have made a laughable attempt to indicate, via color-coded arrows on the platform floor, that one should board the train from the sides of the doors. This would in theory allow those exiting to do so from the center, simultaneously with the boarding hordes. Ha! Instead, in true big-city fashion, everyone masses at each door and just shoves their way on. Those boarding are met of course by the frantic mass trying to occupy the same space as them, shoving their way off. The other day I saw a woman impatient at not being able to instantly get on the train. So she grabbed the arm of a woman trying to exit the train and just shoved her to one side. The non-big city thing about all this is, nobody ever gets upset at anyone else! Compared to, say, in the US, land of the quick-to-anger-for-stupid-reasons crowd. That's because of the overriding rule of motion here (and indeed in all of Southeast Asia). You're responsible for where *you're* going, and everyone else is responsible for only where *they're* going.

This means for drivers, you don't look behind you when you're merging into traffic, only ahead of you, where you're going. If someone approaching from behind is in danger of hitting you, it's their job to slow down. More likely, they'll swerve unannounced into someone else's lane! And it means for pedestrians (and this is hard to accept at first, kids) that the traffic never slows down for you to cross. You just walk out into it, within reason*. And you can be confident that if you're in anyone's way, they'll just go around you. Note: this works better with motos and bikes than with cars and trucks. This last note points out one of the serious problems here in SEA. Cars are fast overtaking bikes and motos for sheer numbers. That's really messing up the traditional system.

*"Within reason" relates to another law that operates simultaneously with "be responsible for where you're going". This one was first delineated by Marchette based on observations in the field. Basically, it's the law of "big beats little." One must always take this into account when stepping out into traffic. As a pedestrian, of course, one is the littlest of all. I won't bore you with all the myriad permutations, but for instance, "fully loaded semi beats minivan," "army truck beats just about anything," "car beats moto," "moto beats cyclo" and "oxcart beats bicycle."

One way they're dealing with the present-day proliferation of "bigs" in Bangkok is to institute all kinds of new very non-SEAsian traffic laws. In fact, they just put a bunch into effect yesterday, to be enforced by a system of points you get on your license. A certain accumulation leads to suspension—just as it does in many US states. Some of the things now outlawed here are going through redlights (motos especially), driving on the sidewalk (ditto), not stopping for pedestrians (!!), and leaving the scene of an accident. Another is taxis refusing to take passengers. At least initially, many people seem to be actually complying with these laws. I was utterly shocked this morning to have two turning autos in the same intersection *stop* for me and allow me to cross. By all rights they should have just charged ahead, leaving me to wait. For a moment, it was like I was west of the Mississippi again (that being the dividing line for pedestrian courtesy shown by autos in the US)... Oh wait, I *am* west of the Mississippi...??

But now I must leave all this jet-setting flashy hustle and bustle behind, and head to a gentler land. I'm speaking of Laos, where the bicycle and the moto still rule. Laos is situated (from what I hear) firmly in both another century (the 19th, maybe?) and another decade (the Soviet-bloc style heyday of the 50s-60s). Stay tuned, adventure clubbers!

Frank (for Frank and Marchette)

So, adventure lovers, here we are in Laos. First of all, let me apologize for getting your hopes up about that 1950s-style Soviet "striving toward the future in solidarity" architecture. I was told it's plentiful here; it's not. Oh, they're still communists. But more Vietnamese style than Soviet. And a very mild form of Vietnamese communism at that.

This place has become a new Monday adventure club favorite! It's poor, money-wise. Poorer than Cambodia, I think. But the people are so happy! As in, inner peace. And as in "functional".

It's hot here, and dusty, but pretty clean. There's way less stink than in both Cambodia and Thailand. And most of the trees the French planted here, not to mention their architecture, is still standing. The US may have bombed the hell out of the rest of Laos, but the war hardly touched the capital here. All in all, it's a very agreeable place to spend 4 1/2 days.

The big adventure so far has been finding out where the university is, finding the right bus that goes out there and then getting on it and off it at the right place. This was all done in Lao,





which I've basically spoken for one week now. Then I had to convince the campus guard that I wasn't there to sow dissent among the young impressionable students. That's what 5 Europeans apparently did a year ago, for which they were promptly jailed! My ultimate goal in this mini-adventure was to track down my friend Boua, with whom I taught language in Arizona in 1996.

I soon learned that Boua was off getting her PhD in Australia. So I went to the office to leave my card for her when she returns. And who should be standing there? Another Lao teacher I know, who was actually my

1.25 cents worth of Kip

roommate at Arizona in 1997! He introduced me to Boua's best friend, who is picking her up at the airport when she comes to visit this Sunday. He then took me around, showed me a few sights, and dropped me off at home.

Oh, home, by the way, is the very nice all-wood house—er, palace. It's rented by the

daughter of a student I taught Khmer to last summer. It's several kilometers from the town center. That's fine, because this place is very walkable. And that's a rare thing for a Southeast Asian city. A few other random observations about this charming place:

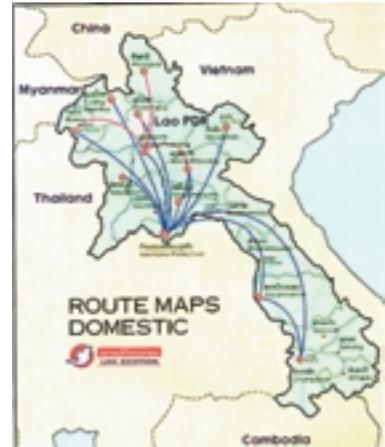


In the 1960s, they built their own version of the Arc De Triumph on a big parkway here. They used money given to them by the US. The money was supposed to build a) a bridge or b) an airport runway (depends on who tells the story). It's now a standard attraction on the tourist circuit.

The money here, the kip, is worth less than one half a Cambodian riel! But they like to use it. More than the Cambodians like to use their money. Most places, you have your choice of paying in kip, Thai baht, or good ole US dollars.

Did I mention that the people are friendly? And there's virtually no crime here. It's no problem to walk around alone at 11 pm. The only other people on the street at that time are hordes of teenagers on motorcycles and bikes. They just cruise around, as there's not a whole lot to entertain young folks here. Except of course watch Thai TV, which comes in loud and clear across the Mekong.

The mighty Mekong is so low this time of year, people grow rice and vegetables several hundred meters into it! It would be very easy to just walk over to Thailand. But very few folks do that here any more. The big refugee exodus of the late 70s and early 80s is over.



“Lao massage” (if there is such a thing?) is a very distant second to Thai massage. First, they rub you with slightly rancid almond oil (way too much of it). Then they kind of half-heartedly knead you for an hour. It’s okay though. The \$3 is totally worth it just to hang out and talk to the masseuses. They giggle and joke and say things about the customers in Lao. After one in another section yells something to my masseuse, she asks me in Lao, “How do you say ‘body odor’ in English?? A little later, they started singing communist songs in Vietnamese that they had learned as kids.

Stay tuned for more!

Okay kids, break out those atlases, because it’s time for a very abbreviated history lesson. You’ll notice that the little country of Laos is nestled snugly between Thailand, Burma, China, Vietnam and Cambodia. It is, as they say, landlocked. It’s also full of mountains. Super steep, dramatic mountains, and kind of high for this area. Many are above 5,000 feet. And there are a few plateaus and valleys scattered here and there.

What this usually means for human society is lots of separate little tribes and kingdoms, with plenty of “minority groups” living in far flung areas. And it’s generally very difficult—if not impossible—for a “modern,” centralized state to control all these remote groups. Or “tribes,” if you will. Such is the case with much of Laos. The lowlands have always been a diverse bunch of mostly Buddhist kingdoms. At times these kingdoms have united together here and there. At other times most of these kingdoms were under the thumb of the Khmers. At other times they were controlled by the Thais. And many of the hill people have never been under the true control of anyone.

Enter the colonial French in the mid 1800s. The French decided they would pull all those little kingdoms, and the hill tribes just out of their administrative reach together. They called this loose conglomeration “Laos.” The French attempted the same sort of “mission civilatrix” here

that they did in Cambodia and Vietnam. They planted lots of shady trees, created riverside promenades and built tons of yellow French buildings. They also created a school system. They never did quite realize their dreams of making Laos a “productive” (crops and goods for export) French colony. According to a French colonial saying, “The Vietnamese make the rice grow, the Khmer watch the rice grow, and the Lao listen to the rice grow.” The Lao, it would seem, are content to produce enough to live on, contribute to the local temple and marry their daughters off, and that’s it. This may explain their mental and emotional stability! They’re not very entrepreneurial folk. Which is probably one reason I like them so much.

The French version of Laos came to an end during the second world war, when the Japanese marched in and kicked their ass. This event made the Southeast Asians of many countries aware that the whities were in fact NOT invincible against Asians! Of course, the Japanese turned out to be even crueller masters in many ways than their European predecessors. But that’s another story.

After the war, the French returned. And a Lao independence movement was launched. They had limited success against the French. But then the Vietnamese soundly kicked the French’s ass for good, in 1954. Laos was “granted” independence. A Lao government (made up primarily of lowland Lao) tried to take over where the French left off. Which means they tried to unite all the various far-flung groups inhabiting the “country” under one flag. And of course, under their control. With mixed results.

It wasn’t long until a Lao communist resistance sprang up. They were heavily trained and supported by the Vietnamese next door. The Viets saw themselves as the grandfathers of communism in Southeast Asia. They wanted to win their own revolution first. But after that, they had every intention of calling the shots in Laos and Cambodia, too.

Meanwhile, America got involved and helped make more of a mess of things. We call that the Vietnam war. There’s lots to read about that, go educate yourselves. Now, back to Laos:

Without US air support, the Lao communists easily rolled on to victory. This happened not so much by bloodshed but by treaty -signing. That made the Lao war one of the least-bloodiest transfers of power in this region (save for the bombing, of course). As I said, the war never really hit the two major cities to a great degree. The ensuing Soviet-by-way-of-Vietnam-style socialist government here had its share of “excesses,” to be sure. Members of the royal family were exiled to remote areas and died. Various “enemies of the state” were sent to “re-education camps” where conditions were quite awful. Though most of them lived to tell about it. They even sent all the petty criminals and prostitutes to an island in a big lake for a while!

In time, following the example of Vietnam, the Lao government loosened up quite a bit, allowing much more private enterprise. This loosening-up was also hastened by the disappearance of the Soviet Union. The USSR, as you may know, was the major source of economic aid and technical training here throughout the 1980s. Eventually Laos also opened to tourism. But they kept up practices such as enforcing early curfews and outlawing prostitution—to this day! What will happen in the future remains to be seen. But I'll tell you, from this observer's perspective, especially comparing things here to Cambodia, things could be a lot worse. And the people seem very happy and adjusted to and largely content with what they have. And that's a model for all of us, isn't it?

Reporting for Monday Adventure Club Visit Laos
Year, I'm Frank,
for Frank and Marchette

P.S. "Visit Laos Year" was a campaign in 1999/2000, when the country first really opened up to tourism and made it easier to get a visa, move around without being stamped at checkpoints, etc. It first caught Monday Adventure Club's eye in 1998/9 when we visited Vietnam and Cambodia for the first time, and we've been wanting to come ever since! We've been very happy to discover that, since apparently no new tourist promotion has sprung up since 1999/2000, the "Visit Laos Year" posters are still in full view everywhere, and we heartily support this apparently timeless campaign



After returning to Bangkok:

The most dangerous ghost is that of a woman who died in childbirth. For a variety of reasons, they are the most vicious and bloodthirsty. This belief holds true throughout Cambodia, Lao and Thailand, and it's the point of departure for today's installment of Monday Adventure Club in Asia!

First, a little background. There's a famous story in Thailand, everyone knows it. It's been made into several movies of varying quality over the years, most recently by Nonzee Nimibutr. The name of the story is Nang Nak, or "miss Nak." Nak is married to Mak. She's pregnant. Mak goes off to war, gets seriously injured, and loses his best friend. Meanwhile, the months roll on and Nak goes into labor...though something is wrong, terribly wrong.

Mak returns home and it's very quiet...but wait! There's Nak, and their baby. They missed each other terribly.

Days and weeks pass, and Mak senses that something is awry. The other villagers never come to his house anymore. One day a friend comes up to Mak in the woods, and asks him why he still stays in that abandoned old house. Mak is quite puzzled, as the family has a happy little life there. His friend goes on to tell him that his wife--and the baby--actually died in childbirth; Mak gets furious and chases his friend away.

Nak--(the ghost) --finds out about this, and goes to the friend's house and kills him. And thus begins a string of killings by the angry ghost including the midwife who stole Nak's wedding band off her corpse. The villagers grow really concerned, so they go to the local monastery for help. The monk goes to Mak's house--seeing it as it really is, decrepit and covered with cobwebs--to try to talk some sense into him, but Mak will hear nothing of it, and angrily sends the monk away. The monk tells him, however, "look through your own legs and you'll see the truth"... When Mak drops something he does just that, and then suddenly he see the house for what it really is, an abandoned falling-apart shack.

Mak goes to the Buddhist temple for refuge; meanwhile the townspeople go to try to burn the house down...Nak strikes out at them, killing many. They also send for a black magician to dig up Nak's corpse and bash her head in, thus sending her to the netherworld where she's reluctant to go. At the temple, the monks surround Mak with holy string, chanting to protect him from the ghost of Nak...suddenly, a young monk looks up and sees Nak, standing (upside down!) on the ceiling of the temple, since she can't enter the holy circle (note: all Thai movies must show Buddhism triumphing over whatever evil is threatening people...it's a must!)...this is truly one of the most goose-pimple inducing moments of the film.

Nak goes on to kill the magician (making him bash his own head in!), and they have to call in the wisest oldest monk they can find, who calmly tells Nak she must give up her husband to the living and go on to the world of the dead where she belongs. It works, and after a tearful goodbye, a piece of her skull is chipped out by the monks; the old monk keeps it for years and it provides great power to him.

What does all this have to do with our travels, adventure fans? This very afternoon, kids, we took the sky train out to the end of the line, and then hired a motorcycle to whisk us through traffic to the grounds of a big ole temple...that's right, the very one in the story!! For the story is supposedly based on an actual event, which took place in a village far from Bangkok in the mid 1800s. Except that "far from Bangkok" then means "just kind of on the beginnings of the outskirts" of Bangkok now, hence our ability to take the sky train there.

Oh, it's a different part of Bangkok, to be sure...quite a few more trees, a little more open space, Songthaews (little pickup trucks with roofs on the back and two rows of benches which serve as a kind of cheap public transit) ply the roads. here aren't any in the rest of Bangkok. Very few white faces are seen in these parts, folks. So what's become of Nak's temple today? Well, I'm sorry to say that the part--it's quite a large complex--with the footprints on the ceiling was not open for viewing. But there was plenty else to see. You see, it's quite an attraction now--not a tourist attraction, but an attraction for local Thais...more of a spiritual attraction. For you see, while Buddhism technically shuns beliefs in spirits and demons and guardian ghosts and the like, the



reality is, Buddhism in all these SEAsian countries is actually a "syncretic mix" (as I'd say if I were still an anthropologist) of animistic beliefs long predating Buddhism. You can also find remnants of ancient Hinduism, and all sorts of crazy stuff. So the spirit of Nang Nak--which still resides in these here parts--can be tapped into and used by folks today to bring them luck, success, etc. Think "Catholicism in Italy or Mexico", or anywhere for that matter with all those crazy miraculous saint cults, and you're getting close.

So Nak today rates an entire shrine! There's a huge statue of her, holding her baby in her arms, and they're covered with little bits of gold leaf, which visitors rub onto them non-stop as they come to pray for help in their various needs. There are also stacks and stacks of wedding clothes (Thai wedding clothes) stacked up in cabinets surrounding the shrine, which makes me think she may provide help in marital issues and, I'm just guessing here, fertility? Certainly plenty of young people were fervently seeking her aid. Then there are the dollies...not as many as I thought there'd be, but visitors from time to time bring her dolls so that she'll regain the child she lost in death. Kind of sweet.

Surrounding the shrine and stretching out along the little river that Mak came rowing down when he returned from war (there's still a cute little village here) are tents, tents of food vendors. (This being Thailand, you're never more than 50m from a food seller) And tents of fortune tellers, this being a particularly auspicious site to have one's fortune told.

All in all a happy and fascinating little place, even if we didn't get to see the footprints. And remember, Monday Adventure Club brought it to you first, kids!

A few random thoughts before we sign off:

1. Thai movies are really coming into their own. And the Thai movie theaters are super swank. For the cheap tickets (about \$3) you get those regular full sized rocky-chairs, but if you pay for gold class (about \$5) you get your own love seat with coffee table and serving hostess who comes around to wait on you. Before every movie you get a few previews, a few commercials and then you have to stand for the King's song. When you sit down again, the whole ordeal can clock in at up to half an hour of added movie pleasure!



2. Squeaky shoes. All the toddlers have them. They're both functional and entertaining! Imagine the joy of a two year old who discovers that with every step comes a squeak! Hours of fun.

3. Okay, I can't resist: here's a vendor selling all sorts of yummy bug snacks: The light colored ones are the silk worms, and the black ones in back are the tasty fried beetles. Place your orders now, for free delivers before Christmas!



And that's about it, folks! Here's hoping you can all journey here to enjoy Bangkokian (and Lao, and Cambodian) splendor in person someday...until the next journey, this is Frank and Marchette, signing off!

Theme song: n-n-n-n monday adventure club, monday adventure club, credits are rolling, written and taped by marchette and Frank for Monday Adventure Club.

This trip was fun in part by those of you who sent encouraging comments.

and last, but not least Adventure clubbers.....

Stay tuned for more!!!!!!!!!! (not really, that's all for now.)

you can stop reading now.

TOKYO SUBWAY MAP





This map was yonked from the internet, you can find it at:

<http://www.asiatravel.com/cambmap.html>

Another good cambodian map can be found at:

<http://www.un.org/Depts/Cartographic/map/profile/cambodia.pdf>

