

### **Thursday, 1st November**

I have most of the day to make final preparations. All the spare food from the fridge goes to Audrey and I have a cup of tea with her. Derek arrives about 3.15 and we have tea and biscuits and leave at four. It's a short drive to the Toby carvery for the usual carvery dinner followed by treacle sponge and custard. Derek treats me to this and a glass of red wine. The trousers survive the dinner without the red wine stains of the last time.

Heathrow takes another half an hour and I get there at about 6.45, and find that Lorna is delayed on the M 25. The Ramblers agent is efficient and gets two seats together and the leader Jean-Pierre is in evidence. Security is easy and soon we are waiting for the plane which turns out to have a mechanical defect. Eventually we are told that it's not flying tonight and after reclaiming luggage and queuing we get a coach to the Hilton at terminal five. The rooms are comfortable but we are not installed until 2am. The Hotel must get the record for the longest euphemism for a bar of soap: 'Moisture infusion facial bar'!

### **Friday 2nd November**

After a short and fitful night's sleep up at eight for a bath and down to breakfast which is ample and good. The rest of the morning is spent relaxing in the hotel with the papers and a book. At 12 the first buses back to the terminal arrive but I wait for the second tranche which come around half an hour later. The weather is pleasant with sunny periods and not too cold. By one I'm back at terminal three and check in is easy with the same seats as yesterday's allocation.

There is of course another hour or so to wait after security but we eventually get inboard and leave soon after 3.30 with arrival scheduled for 9.30 tomorrow. After about an hour the usual meal is served with pasta and pasta salad and chocolate mousse. I manage the usual G&T and red wine and then I settle down to TV programmes on the iPad and radio on the iPod. I find I sleep little if at all in spite of the reasonably comfortable seats with a vacant one next to me.

### **Saturday 3rd November**

Breakfast is served at eight and again is reasonable with scrambled egg, mushrooms, tomato and bacon. We do land shortly after 9.30 and security is quick and baggage return not too bad although mine is one of the last. Our local guide is waiting for us, and apparently was yesterday; the message from Jean-Pierre not having got through.

The coach to the hotel takes about an hour, and I recognise the Royal City Hotel as the same as on the last visit with Ramblers. Check in is quick and after getting money from the ATM across the road I'm soon in the bath for a welcome soak.

At 1.30 we leave for our shortened city tour: the Grand Palace and the Wat Pho, both of which

visited on the last visit here. I vowed not to take photographs but I did take some and they turned out to be the same as before, in poorer weather - mostly overcast with a few spots of rain.

At five we returned by coach to the hotel for a couple of hours rest followed by briefing and a very acceptable dinner with a glass of beer for B160. And so to bed by 9.30 for a reasonable nights sleep and wake up several times but go back to sleep.

### **Sunday 4th November**

It's up at five for a breakfast at 5:30. The coach leaves at six for the drive to the airport which takes about an hour. Check in is easy but then at security they won't let me take the aerosol insecticide which I bought yesterday. I'm not sure whether it's because it's an aerosol or because it's more than 100 ml. After security I buy some insecticide cream also from Boots. Soon we are getting on to a plane which is much newer than that BA one and very comfortable. The flight is just over an hour and we are served a sandwich with juice and coffee. The weather is warm again with quite a lot of cloud. The landing at Chiang Rai is quite bumpy on to the runway of the small airport. The bonus is that the luggage comes through quickly and so we are soon away at about 10. The road north goes through extensive farming land and soon the hills of Burma are visible to the left and then the hills of Laos to the right.

Both places that we stop at are ones that I have visited: Mae Sai (for the bridge to Burma) and Sop Ruak (Golden Triangle and Opium Museum). The weather gets quite warm and sunny and the steps up to the viewpoints seem steep. I walk around Mae Sai by myself ending up in a cafe for an excellent cappuccino before joining the others for a decent lunch in the restaurant of the Hotel Wang Thong. From there it's half an hour to the Golden Triangle for the second stop and just over 1.5 hours to Chiang Kong which we reach at 5.30 just as its getting dark. The hotel is fairly simple with a balcony overlooking the river but noisy. Dinner is good with plenty of dishes and served on the veranda. Live music is threatened until 11.30 but it soon stops. Sleep comes only in short bursts.

### **Monday 5th November**

It was a bad night; the air conditioning was effective and the music stopped but I didn't sleep until well after two and then not very well and with dreams. No doubt jet lag and perhaps the effect of the green tea. Up at 6.30 to see the sun over the Mekong and to breakfast, again served on the veranda, and again good. The sun disappears, but the views are still good.

We leave at eight after I have had time to shower and pack. It's getting quite warm and sunny. We go to the pier in a fleet in tuck tucks for the mile or so. Then it's the first queue, for the Thai exit stamp. No problem but patience needed. The crossing of the river is in small, long boats which are very low in the river. There's a bridge being built downstream (with Chinese money?). It's a relief to get out of the boat to the chaotic queues for the Lao immigration with costs \$35' funded out of the Ramblers' kitty. With the stamp obtained I head up to the ATM to become a kip millionaire.

Soon we are into minibuses to take us to the landing stage to embark on our boat for the day at 9.30. Again it's long but much more substantial with tables, two sorts of seats, a roof and toilet.

The day passes very pleasantly; it's warm but there's a fair breeze with good scenery of the jungle on either side. Initially the river is the border but we soon head into Lao territory. Aft a couple of hours we visit a village and are targeted by children selling handicrafts. They're on their break from school, which is across the river.

Time passes on the boat drinking coffee and beer, chatting and reading and just watching the banks glide past. A decent lunch is served with soup, several meat and veg dishes and more fruit.

The afternoon passes much as the morning, and we reach Pak Beng at about five, rather earlier than expected. The hotel is modest with a small room facing the cliff. Although there is only a fan in the room and a cold shower, it's quite comfortable. Lorna and I go out for a look around the village. It has several shops and cafes and there are motorbikes buzzing around, but not noisy.

Supper is modest on the terrace overlooking the river and soon afterwards I go to bed, but for another poor night.

## **Tuesday 6th November**

Apparently there was a storm during the night and morning dawns grey and very misty. For breakfast on the terrace there is some good scrambled egg for breakfast but the rest is basic. The babas are wild complete with crunchy seeds. After breakfast I catch up with a shower and feel rather better.

At 8.30 it's time to leave and the day is very similar to yesterday and very peaceful apart from one rather clingy man wanting to talk the whole time. Before lunch we visit another village which is much more sophisticated and not of the hill tribes. After lunch there are the Pak Ou caves on two levels; the higher being darker and more extensive. There is a good view across the river and beyond to the mountains in the east.

We arrive at Louang Phrabang at sunset with good views west along the river. A couple of minibuses take us to the hotel, the Villa Santi Resort, about five kilometres out of town. It's very comfortable with extensive gardens. Unpacking and bathing and relaxing takes up the time until we meet at 7.15 for briefing and the minibuses to town for lunch at a good restaurant in town. It's Lao and finishes up as usual with fruit. Three of us share a bottle of Chilean wine, and Wifi is available. At 9.30 we head back to the hotel and into bed, but in spite of efficient AC, quiet and a comfortable bed I sleep little.

## **Wednesday 7th November**

I stagger out of bed at 6.30 for an early breakfast, which turns out to be extensive with western and Laotian items. I share a table with J-P and on his suggestion construct a soup with noodles,

and have coffee, müesli, juice and a (rather poor) croissant. Back in the room a bath makes me feel rather better and there is time to relax before we leave at nine by minibus into town. It's grey and misty, but gradually during the morning the sun comes out for a sunny and hot afternoon. The morning is spent walking around, a temple and the ethnic museum which is small but interesting. Most have lunch in a restaurant on the riverside, but Barbara, Lorna and I go next door and I just have ginger tea. I think I ate too much yesterday. I rush off to get stamps (11 000) at the post office and catch up with the group at the next temple, which is particularly attractive.

From there we walk alongside the Nam river, which is particularly attractive. Some of the group head back to the hotel while most climb the hill to see the fine view of the rivers and the countryside round about. Then it's down and back by minibus to the hotel.

There is time for relaxing before meeting for briefing and dinner at 7:15. Again we had more power to have dinner in a restaurant. It's very similar to last nights except that we are sitting outside, And the Wi-Fi is not needed. I refrain from wine and hope that he will help me to sleep. We return at about 930 and I heard for bed straight away. It proves a much better night.

#### **Thursday 8th November**

For once I have a decent night's sleep; ten till four, and then again until almost 5.30. The only trouble is that the minibus into town to see the monks soliciting alms is due to leave then, and, sure enough, it's left. However, a party of Swiss are leaving at 5.45 and I hitch a lift with them. The leader is a ski instructor(ress) in Savognin. I have 45 mins watching and then return with them in time to have a bath and a leisurely breakfast.

We leave at nine. It's another grey misty morning which turns into hot sunshine in the afternoon.

The first stop is at the Royal Palace which is now a museum, but it's not brilliant and involves fussing around with locks and shoes. From there we go to a textile market which is another retail opportunity for some. And then the best part of the day: the drive into the countryside to see the waterfalls. They are spectacular and milky turquoise as though supplied by glacial meltwater. Many of the paths are very slippery and muddy.

There's time for a good coffee with a pain au chocolat on the way down before the return minibus to the hotel. It's good to have time relaxing in the room before a short walk, bath and dinner. We take dinner in the hotel dining room. Because its more than the budget, we contribute \$5 to the cost. The food is good, with rather different dishes, including mushroom and pork soup and steamed fish in banana leaves. Also, sticky rice but it doesn't line up to its publicity. After dinner, to bed.

#### **Friday 9th November**

Another reasonable night, although more intervals than last night. After a bath to breakfast and another good meal, chatting to J-P about the French educational system. The day starts reasonably relaxed with departure at 8.30. It's quite a small bus and some luggage has to be

inside on the back seat, and rather cramped seating.

The route turns out to be spectacular with several substantial ups and downs. The road is also very winding with mixed surfaces, especially bad towards the end. Bucks potholes just don't match up! The jungle is dense with isolated villages on the roadside. The flora changes as we climb, with the bananas in plenty lower down, but disappearing further up. We stop every two hours or so. At the first the WC costs 2000, and there are local snacks for sale, including fried bananas and sticky rice and sugar cane battered and deep fried.

Lunch is at a spectacular site overlooking the mountains which are very distinctive: the karst with jagged peaks and ridges densely covered with vegetation. I have a beer and go to sit just below the ridge overlooking the huge view, only spoiled by electricity pylons. There is then a long descent and then undulating countryside. Our one stop is at a village that appears to specialise on its stalls in Vodka with various objects infused in it. We eventually get to Vang Vieng at around 5.45 and are soon installed in the hotel which is perfectly OK if not as luxurious as the one at Luang Prabang, although the WiFi does work straight away. The room is warm (29) but the AC seems fairly efficient.

Dinner is modest with soup and various salads. I retire early and have a reasonable night.

### **Saturday 10th November**

It's a rather peaceful day, with breakfast at seven. A plate contains cucumber, tomato, fried egg, jam, butter and bread, and the coffee is instant inspired by an appetising smell in the lobby.

We leave at nine on foot, crossing the river by a suspension footbridge and climb the steps to the cave. This has several passages, rock formations, a small Buddha and a view over the river and town. The weather is already warm with bright sunshine and the cave is pleasantly cool. We return and take tucks to the old air field where our bus is waiting to take us to the 'mulberry farm', which turns out to be a progressive organic farm with various charitable projects including volunteers and work for children. We are shown around by a committed and articulate man, and stay for a good lunch - I have pumpkin soup and vegetable tempura, and buy some mulberry tea.

We get the bus back to the hotel for an afternoon rest, from 2.30 to four. Then a walk around the town, postcards and over a footbridge to the island in the river, with excellent views up to the mountain and the river side of the town. Then back to this and preparation for dinner. We go to the restaurant of a Hotel on the river side, which is thought to be more attractive than our hotel. The meal turns out to be better than the one we had yesterday, and the staff are very attentive. Then it's back to the hotel for bed before 10 and a reasonable night.

### **Sunday 11th November**

Up at 5:30 to see the sunrise, and after a shower out for a constitutional. At 6:30 the monks leave the monastery for their arms gathering. The mountains look particularly fine in the early

sunshine. Breakfast is just the same as yesterday.

Packing and then we leave the hotel at nine and walk around to the bakery to get provisions for lunch. The bus is waiting for us on the old air strip with our luggage already loaded. The road to Vientianne is shorter than the last transfer and leading out of the mountains. However the surface is rather poor and the bus limited to 35kph, but the the scenery is interesting with lots of villages and the time passes agreeably. We have three stops: two villages, one of which appears to specialise in smoked fish, another with a friendship bridge from the Japanese and a Buddhist rock carvings where we have lunch.

We get to Vientianne at about four to the Lao Plaza Hotel, five stars and recognisable as the international style. We're soon settled into the comfortable rooms and after a quick bath Lorna and I go out for a walk along the Mekong for the sunset.

Dinner is at a local restaurant which appears to specialise in tour groups, but with above average food.

### **Monday 12th November**

A good night's sleep, and down to breakfast before seven. There's everything and I make a good stab at it. It's a leisurely start at nine and we spend the morning doing the standard sights in the hot, bright sunshine. It's almost a relief to get back to the hotel at midday.

After arrest, Lorna and I head out for lunch. The Chinese Dumpling restaurant that's recommended is there, but closed, apparently permanently. The antique shop cafe has some very good coffee and then we find the Mak Phet which is recommended in both guide books. In addition to training and supporting street children, it provides some very good food. An American group is just leaving as its quite late. We have spicy papaya salad, spring rolls ana sweet made with coconut milk, sweet potatoes and lychees with green tea. After that a bookshop and back to the hotel for a welcome and cool rest.

Dinner is in another local restaurant and is mediocre, and sparse with dissent from the troops. And so to bed.

### **Tuesday 13th November**

Breakfast as before and then we have to pack. At 9:15 we leave for the short journey to the airport. It's a very compact airport and so security, immigration and check-in are easy but then there is quite a wait. There is a reasonable book shop. The flight is comfortable with a light meal in the almost new plane. The views are good including those of Angkor Wat what the large lake in the middle of Cambodia. The flight time is an hour and a quarter. At Phnom Penh the arrangements for visas and immigration are efficient complete with photograph and fingerprints. Our guide and bus are waiting for a transfer to the Hotel which would take about an hour. But as the Royal Palace closes at four we go directly there and do our visit and to the museum. The weather is hot and sticky and mostly overcast.

It is a relief to get to the hotel which is another large international one. A bath and a rest soon revive and I arrange 100 minutes Wi-Fi for five dollars.

At 7:30 we go back into town to a attractive restaurant on the river side for some decent food. Two glasses of wine cost \$7.50. Then it's back to the hotel and bed by 10 for a reasonable night.

### **Wednesday 14th November**

Up at six for a bath and then down to breakfast at 6:45. There is lots of choice including western and Cambodian with decent croissants.

We leave at nine and head through the busy traffic out of town to the killing fields, which are well organised and peaceful. There is a short film show. Afterwards we go back into town and to the museum. This was a school and the classrooms are on three floors in three blocks, and were obviously quite bleak. They now have artefacts and the cells where prisoners were tortured.

We another good lunch at a Friends restaurant and bought the recipe book.

After the usual rest we went out to another decent restaurant.

### **Thursday 15th November**

It was a reasonably leisurely start for our drive north to Siam Reap. It took about five hours including a spell along a dirt track, because the government was using the main road. It was interesting to see the flat farm land and villages.

After checking in to the hotel we have time to visit a couple of old Hindu temples about 10 km out of town. On the way there was a torrential downpour.

Dinner was a local restaurant: European food with salad, chicken and fruit and quite reasonable.

### **Friday 16th November**

An early start for the main set of temples. The weather is warm and very humid. We have a decent lunch at a local Kmer restaurant, and then tour Angkor Wat. We all get very sticky!

### **Saturday 17th November**

An early (7.30) start for the 30km ride north to another Hindu temple. It's small with lots of visitors and would not be exceptional in India.

Back to the hotel for a shower and final packing, a light lunch and at 1.15 to the Airport, very close to town. The flight to Bangkok is just 45mins and comfortable but they manage to serve a decent lunch.

The six hours or so in Bangkok is partly spent at the Novotel with a very good buffet dinner. It involves going landside and half the party don't saying that's illegal given that we have checked our luggage through to Heathrow.

The flight is comfortable and on time with dinner (about 2am Bangkok time) and breakfast served.

### **Sunday 18th November**

Immigration and luggage are fairly speedy and Malcolm and Elaine are waiting for me. After the 6.30 landing I'm home before eight.