

## SE Asia

Greetings from Thailand on the edge of the Mekong River looking across to Laos.

It's not been an uneventful journey here. At Heathrow there was a worrying message on the display to tell us to wait. Eventually we were told to go to the gate but soon we were advised that the plane had a fault. They decided that the fault would take longer to fix and so postponed the plane until Friday at 1530. The 300+ passengers were not handled particularly well but eventually sandwiches were brought and we were bussed to the Hilton Hotel at terminal five. By 2 am I was in my very nice and comfortable room but very tired. I slept reasonably well and had a late breakfast at 8:30 and spent the rest of the morning relaxing.

Then it was back by bus to terminal three and we did leave at 1530 for the predicted 11 hour flight. This was uneventful but I got little sleep and we landed at 9:30 local time. The local guide was waiting for us for the second time; the message hadn't got through to him. We had an abbreviated city tour, dinner at the hotel and then another short night, having to get up at five for the flight north to Chiang Rai. Everything then went smoothly and we had an attractive tour of the border area with my Myanmar and Laos and got here to the hotel at 5:30.

Tomorrow we start the boat trip down the river and so we'll see what that brings.

Regards,  
Martin

Vang Vieng, Laos, Saturday

No more delays to report! The two days sailing down the Mekong were very enjoyable. From Chiang Khong in Thailand we crossed the river in very precarious low boats and queued up for the visas and entry stamps before we could get onto the boat that was to take us south. It was a bit like a long barge but taller and wider with tables. An excellent lunch was served on board and the eighteen of us had the boat to ourselves. The countryside was largely uninhabited except for a few villages of hill people, one of which we visited, along with caves and of course some handicraft sales.

Half way through the 'cruise' we stayed overnight at a simple hotel in the village Pak Beng, which seemed largely to exist to cater for people doing the sort of thing that we were. We were glad that we weren't on the fast boat doing the two day trip in just one using a speed boat. They were kitted out with crash helmets and it didn't look as restful as our option.

The second day's trip took us to Luang Prabang, onetime capital of Laos, and a very laid back, pleasant sort of place. We were staying five kilometres out of town in an excellent, comfortable hotel with plenty of grounds and excellent food (the best so far). We had three nights there and we took excursions to the various temples, palaces, caves and viewpoints that tourists visit. And of course an early morning trip into town to see the silent monks walking around town to receive alms. We also had time to relax with the odd drink in the grounds!

Yesterday saw was back on the coach. It was a winding road climbing up and down the mountainsides through the jungle. The vegetation was mostly tropical with lots of banana plants bougainvillea and such, although it thinned out at the top. The mountains were fantastical limestone peaks.

This place is used a lot for river sports but today we are going on a bus to caves. Already at breakfast time the temperature is high and typically we be in the low 30s.

Regards,

Martin

Phnom Penh, 14 November

Another day, another country.

Vang Vieng turned out to be rather different from the other places we have visited: it had been a back packers place and still had all the cheap hostels and pancake restaurants but appeared to be reinventing itself and getting rid of the reputation for drug taking. The water sports were still there including tubing: floating down the river on an inner tube. The mountains round about were stunning and there were some gentle walks in the valley. The hotel was new and didn't really have its act together with only average food and interestingly designed rooms. But the wifi was efficient. The best meal we had was after

looking round the organic farm and then sampling the produce. The boss was obviously very enterprising with his volunteers and contributions to local education. No doubt my future visitor will be offered the mulberry tea that I bought there.

It was another interesting drive through the country, rather flatter to the capital of Laos, stopping at various villages. Each seemed to specialise in something different. At one, all the stall were selling varieties of smoked fish which surprisingly smelled very appetising. What a shame none of the hotels seems to have purchased it.

It's round about now that the other members of the group have shown there individuality. Two stand out as being 'pains' with there tendency to infiltrate any conversation that's going, be rude to waiters and to take more than there share of the food. But on the whole it's a jolly group of like minded folk, many of whom have been on many such holidays.

The food included with the holiday is rather bland and not interesting but at lunchtime we do our own thing and can find rather more local food. In Vientiane was a restaurant run for Street children to support them and to train them. The food there was good including spiced papaya salad a 'signature' dish.

Vientiane, the capital of Laos is described as one of the most laid-back capitals of the world and so it transpired. However traffic and new building are transforming it and little of the colonial architecture is left.

Yesterday we flew to Phnom Penh, capital of Cambodia, and had a hectic afternoon looking around the Royal Palace and museum. The day finished with a good meal by the side of the Mekong.

Siam Reap, home of Angkor Wat

We're sitting in the lobby of the hotel waiting to go to the plane, and hoping to eat a green papaya salad which should be very spicy We first fly to Bangkok and then Have supper there, before taking the overnight flight to Heathrow.

Sorry I pressed the send button too soon!

Our stay in Cambodia was just four days we had two in Phnom Penh and then two in Siam Reap. PP is a really modern town with all the facilities and some good food. There are traces of the colonial architecture along with the Bhuddist stupas and temples. Cambodia as a whole is largely flat with lots of water, both lying and also falling even though we are technically in the dry season. PP was harrowing as the site of the killing fields and associated museum.

We then had a longish bus ride to the north for our visits to the temples including Angkor Wat. It was interesting to see the countryside with lots of villages which were much poorer than the capital.

The temples were much as you might expect, with all the vegetation seen on Tomb Raiders, or whatever the film was. There were plenty of visitors but not the crush that we had been led to expect. The heat and the 100% humidity made up for this lack!

Herein the airport there's just 15mins WiFi, so more when I get back, along with the photos.

There were no delays on the return journey, but it was rather tedious. The flight from Siam Reap to Bangkok was just 45 minutes, but with lunch served. At Bangkok there was a wait of seven hours for the flight to London, and we filled some of it with dinner at the Novotel at the airport. It was a buffet, but much superior to some that we had had, and I managed six courses, starting with smoked salmon, through soup, roast beef (no Yorkshire pudding), several sweets and cheese.

The flight to London took over eleven hours, with another dinner and breakfast, before landing soon after six. Malcolm and Elaine were waiting for me and so I was home before eight. With seven hours time difference, it's taking a time to get back into a routine.

A selection of photos are available at:

<https://picasaweb.google.com/106694286179758964525/2012SEAsia?authuser=0&feat=directlink>

Regards, Martin