



CINDA HUNTER

Cambodia and Vietnam 2005



I spent December 2005 travelling in Cambodia and Vietnam combining a holiday with a buying trip for my shop

We started out at Siem Reap in Cambodia (flew in via Singapore) where we spent five days visiting a few of the extraordinary Angkor temples built by the Khmer kings between the 8th and 14th centuries. The temples are built over an area of about 600 square kilometres and there are related temples in Thailand, Myanmar and Java. Angkor Wat is the largest, best restored and most famous and its scale is truly astounding. The perimeter of the actual temple (the inner section of Angkor Wat) has 1,2km of the most exquisite relief carvings – unfortunately the camera ran out of batteries as we started the climb to the top of the temple at Angkor Wat! We started at Angkor Thom, a walled area of 9 square kilometres which has a most magnificent and impressive gates and includes Bayon (wonderful relief carvings), the Elephant Terrace and Baphuon (currently under reconstruction). One day we drove about 100 km to visit Beng Mealea, a large temple complex which hasn't been restored and is slowly being destroyed by the surrounding dense jungle. En route we stopped at Banteay Srei (the Citadel of the Woman) which has really beautiful relief carvings. We drove on to Kbal Spean (the river of a thousand Lingas and hiked several kilometres uphill to see carvings of figures and lingas in the riverbed.



Angkor Wat



Angkor Wat – relief carvings



Banteay Srei



Beng Mealea



Preah Khan

At Beng Mealea enormous ficus trees have taken root in the vaulted roofs of the temples and over the centuries have sent roots down the walls to the ground. They look like they are part of the structure itself. This was one of our favourite temples as the encroachment of the jungle and absence of tourists gave it a sense of time and tranquillity that we didn't really encounter elsewhere. They have also left the ficus trees at some of the other temples (like Ta Prohm) but they have mainly been removed as they do destroy the buildings. We had a good guide who knew the normal tourist patterns so we were lucky enough to get to many of the places (including Angkor Wat itself) when there were few people around. Angkor currently gets 2 million tourists a year and they expect it to reach 5 in the next few years – so if you are even thinking about going don't wait.



The markets in Siem Reap and Phnom Penh (Russian Market) were real Aladdin's Caves – they had everything from motor car parts to children's toys to clothes, jewellery and crafts. I spent hours 'fossicking' through everything and found some really extraordinary things like antique Chinese Eye Beads from the Warring States period (1st and 4th centuries BC), an amazing amethyst ring (purported to come from Angkor) as well as contemporary ruby and sapphire necklaces and earrings (incredibly reasonably priced) as well as silver and copper hen and bird containers. I also found some beautiful old lacquer boxes.



While at Siem Reap we took a boat trip to see the floating villages – mainly populated by Vietnamese fishermen who live on houseboats. Most house an extended family (including dogs – pets not food!) and all have pot plants on board. As the river drops in the dry (relatively) season, the families simply move with the water but live in amazingly unsanitary conditions! This is effectively a tributary of the Mekong Delta and coming from dry South Africa the quantity and extent of the water is mind-boggling. As we flew into Siem Reap all you could see was water with a few trees sticking out. All the houses in the villages are built on stilts and rice fields extend as far as you can see. Cambodia is much poorer than Vietnam and still recovering from the madness of the Khmer Rouge who targeted and murdered all intellectuals – it is difficult to rebuild a country when you are having to recreate an educated class. Schools run two sessions of classes daily and teachers are paid \$30 per month. But the cost of living is commensurately low. In Siem Reap most local people are riding bicycles, as you move to Phnom Penh there are a lot more motorbikes. In Ho Chi Minh City (Saigon) there is an unstoppable sea of traffic, mainly motorbikes but with more cars and even more cars, traffic and the first highways as we got to Hanoi in the north. All women (and some men) wear masks!! It is truly extraordinary what is carried on bikes and motorbikes. Our record for passengers on one small 100cc motorbike was SEVEN people (granted two babies!). Motorbikes transport large bonsai trees (all houses, apartments and gardens have lots of pot plants with quite large, shaped trees being most popular. There are also nurseries selling trees and plants everywhere), huge sheets of glass, boxes, enormous piles of cut flowers – in fact anything conceivable (or to us, inconceivable!). In the Museum of Ethnology in Hanoi (a superb museum created by the Musee de L'Homme) they had a bicycle used until quite recently by an old man to deliver fishing baskets – there were 800 packed onto the bicycle!).



Floating Village – Siem Reap River





800 baskets on one bike



Transporting pottery



Saigon Street

As we landed on Con Dao island (about 150km south east of Saigon), we plane banked steeply and lurched alarmingly low over the waves as we came into land. We had arrived in a howling gale on a runway which spanned one end of the island. We had chosen Con Dao as we wanted a bit of a beach holiday and this looked lovely without being on the tourist map. It was also winter in Vietnam and the main beach areas are further north and in areas which experience winter rain. Con Dao also has similar status to Robbin Island in that political activists were jailed there by the French and then the Americans under particularly inhumane conditions (notably what are called Tiger Cages where the bars are at the top and where the guards delighted in throwing lime and excrement on the inmates). As we drove along the one road to our (very comfortable) hotel, the sea was being whipped up by the wind and when we arrived in the bay, the entire local fishing fleet was taking shelter – very picturesque as they are all wooden boats, brightly painted, sporting flags (and the inevitable pot plants). We walked through the really beautiful, forest reserve to a little bay on the other side of island (the side facing towards the mainland) and swam out to a much lauded coral reef about 300 meters off shore in a lovely little protected bay. Well we did see more fish but the coral (which was quite extensive) was covered in dust and when we spoke to the people at the dive centre, they said it was mainly dead as a result of silt and toxins that came down the Mekong Delta – Con Dao is about 150 km offshore!



Con Dao – view



Con Dao - Bay (damaged coral)



Con Dao – fishing fleet

The disadvantages of being an early tourist is that there is very little tourist infrastructure – i.e. no nice little restaurants etc but we had five nights there which gave us lots of time to sort out what was really good in our hotel's restaurant: very good prawns (they call them shrimps), freshly made lime and pineapple juice and to discover that spring rolls in Vietnam are not great and that even the seafood ones contain some sort of pork sausage. We had our best of what we have always called Vietnamese (the unfried ones wrapped in soft rice paper and containing fresh veg and seafood), in Siem Reap. In fact the best food was in Cambodia, the further north we went, the blander it became – stir-fried or steamed with no spices or seasoning! The food problem was compounded in Vietnam by the Avian Flu scare which meant that there was NO CHICKEN OR DUCK OR EVEN EGGS, on the menu in Vietnam!! We discovered Vietnamese coffee (roasted with butter so it has a very rich, almost chocolate taste) and filtered directly into your cup with an ingenious little metal filter system, unto a healthy dollop of condensed milk. Once we learned to ask for additional hot water to make it hot enough, fill the cup and make it less strong, we developed a taste for it. Vietnam is famous for its coffee (French legacy) and one variety is known as Weasel coffee as the beans are eaten by and pass intact through the digestive system of weasels before being roasted. We saw it in Saigon and should have bought some as we never saw it again.

In Phnom Penh, we ate at some really good restaurants along the river (including the famous Foreign Correspondents Club). One night, walking there from our hotel, we went through a local street food market where we saw tables with crispy fried tarantulas, scorpions, corn-crickets etc.!! Another local

delicacy (particularly in Vietnam) is bottles of rice wine containing a number of snakes (including a cobra with hood open) and often scorpions etc.



Soft spring rolls & mango salad



Bottled snakes & live scorpions



I-Kat Weaving (Cambodia)

As usual, so many things reinforced the fact that when you are travelling and see something you like, buy it – the chances are that you won't see it again! For example, I should have bought more Cambodian silk shawls – beautiful, heavy raw silk, stripped in the most beautiful colours – indigo, lime, coral all juxtaposed and quite sensational as well as the fabric they weave using the I-Kat (tie and dye the thread) method which produces the most amazing designs. As we kept seeing Vietnamese silk in the markets, we figured we'd see Cambodian silk in Vietnam but alas, no such luck. When we were driving to Beng Mealea, we saw packs of palm sugar being sold on the roadside and fortunately stopped to buy some as we never saw it again. It is delicious, like fudge with a strange molasses-like flavour. The villagers tap the juice from the palms, boil it down in big vats on the side of the road until it is thick enough to shape into discs about 1 cm deep and 2 cm in diameter. They then pack about ten of these into containers fashioned from palm leaves.



Buying Palm Sugar - Cambodia

We left a hot Saigon and flew to Hué, about 1000 km north and known as the cultural centre of Vietnam. We arrived to pouring rain and 11 degrees! We knew it rained all year round in central Vietnam, but the rains were very late and the cold very unusual. We had an excellent guide who took us (in rapidly acquired raincoats) to the Pagoda, The Citadel (Hué's Forbidden City, built along similar lines to the one in Beijing. It was badly damaged by US bombing during the war and we saw the parts that have been reconstructed to date). We were lucky enough to encounter a Japanese film crew filming a programme on local music. A highlight was lunch at Ngoc Son Garden House where the owner, a famous Hue historian, talked about the construction of the garden house by his family (a member of the royal family) in the early 1900's as well as Hue's history and traditions and customs. His wife cooked us a seven course lunch. Each course small but delicious and definitely the best meal we had in Vietnam.



We were driven from Hue to Hoi An, the city of two thousand tailors, with a brief stopover in Danang (a horrible, flat, industrial, seaside city) to visit the Cham Museum and see the statues and carvings from various Cham temples (The Cham empire included Angkor).

Hoi An was a very picturesque town with narrow streets and lovely old buildings. It was located along a river about 5km from the sea which we never bothered going to (to "laze on the beach" as suggested in our itinerary) as it was raining!! We spent a lot of time in Hoi An visiting tailors and having clothes made for ourselves and for the shop. They can copy or make anything (including shoes) and we took the opportunity to replenish our wardrobes with lovely silk and linen but also beautiful cord pants, wool and cashmere jackets, cotton shirts – one member of our party even



had a dinner jacket made out of silk/cashmere. The speed at which they make things is amazing – he was fitted for his dinner jacket in the evening and when he went for a fitting the next morning it was ready (and fitted perfectly!). While in Hoi An we drove 50km to see the My Son temple (one time capital of the Cham Kingdom and linked to Angkor). Unfortunately it had been badly bombed by US during the war and really wasn't worth visiting since we had already been to Angkor (where, sadly, it wouldn't even have merited a glance!!).



At this stage we were interestingly overweight for our flight from Danang to Hanoi (despite the fact that we had railed my three large boxes of Cambodia purchases ahead to Hanoi) and were carrying a lot more hand-luggage!!

Halong Bay: An unexpected highlight of the trip



Halong Bay is a World Heritage Site where we spent one night on a wooden junk. It is about 150km drive north of Hanoi and comprises around 3,000 vegetated limestone outcrops that emerge from the China Sea (there are also some in Thailand and in China). We arrived having stopped (very briefly) at the most unspeakable pottery en route where there were dozens of tour buses. Arriving at the harbour in Halong Bay there were even more tour buses and a harbour full of wooden junks of all sizes and "Star" levels and we feared the worst. But, once we got on the boat and left the harbour it was glorious. The cabins were small but well appointed - beautiful wood, crisp white sheets, and a good shower (albeit onto the tiled floor of the bathroom which is fairly normal there). As we departed the harbour they sat us down to a five course meal at beautifully appointed tables (starched white clothes and napkins) consisting of crab, prawns, fish, vegetables noodles (some pork!!) and finishing off with fruit. The sea was calm, there was no wind, it wasn't raining (overcast only and slightly misty) and we sat on the top deck as we glided past these incredible lime outcrops which rose straight out of this milky blue sea. It was bliss!

Hanoi is a huge city where I finally found silk velvet (which we hadn't found elsewhere) which I had made into gorgeous silk velvet jackets and pants. I also had some other exquisite silk clothing made and found some lovely bamboo reclining chairs. We went to see a water puppet performance (really worthwhile) and I subsequently managed to buy some beautiful old wooden puppets: a wonderful bright yellow wooden boat manned by paddlers, some figures and some bright yellow "cats" which are a cross between leopards and tigers – they are gorgeous!

