

MY ASIAN ADVENTURE

PART 1: INTREPID'S CKL GRAND CHINA COMFORT TOUR 22 DAYS FROM 12 APRIL TO 2 MAY 2010

China is not everyone's cup of tea, but it has been at the top of my have-to-see list for many years and here I was, on April 9, on my way to what was to prove a lifetime and life-changing experience.

I am about to discover all the wonder and beauty of fascinating China, one of the oldest nation's on earth and now becoming a force to be reckoned with as its economy grows from strength to strength (Obama, take note!). The depth of China's character has arisen as a result of its extraordinary evolution from the ancient realm of the emperors, through the turbulent years of revolution, and into its rapid modernisation in the 21st century and it is here that I will savour the captivating culture, stunning countryside, vast history, ancient archaeological sites and bustling cities that make up this rapidly evolving land.

I was very impressed with both Cape Town International Airport and OR Tambo International Airport, in particular with the proactive friendliness and helpfulness of the ground staff who guided me through the labyrinth of passages to the waiting aircraft. Bring it on, FIFA World Cup Soccer 2010!

Hong Kong time on landing was 06:30 which made it around 00:30 back home and my first impressions of this sprawling metropolis are dampened by rain, which gave me an excuse to lie up in my room to let the jet lag ease away which is at the Stanford Hillview Hotel located in a quiet corner of Kowloon's bustling Tsimshatsui, Hong Kong's premier shopping and entertainment area.

Breakfast over I hit the road, Jack, down Chatham Road South into Salisbury Road to Tourism Information at the Bus Terminal for advice on buying an Octopus ticket literally to ferry me wherever I wanted to go.



The Star Ferry ride took me to Pier 7 from where I walked over reclaimed land and onto bus 260 to Stanley via the Aberdeen Tunnel, past Ocean World, through Repulse Bay (some serious real estate here, not to mention the array of luxury German cars) and down to the street market where colourful displays of silk scarves, jade and other semi-precious stone jewellery and calligraphical artworks draw at one's purse strings. I didn't succumb but then, remember, I still have seven weeks of touring to go.

I opted not to walk, walk, walk up to the Tin Hau Temple, built in 1767, and which houses (I'm reluctant to say 'boasts') the spread skin of the last tiger shot in Hong Kong. Not wishing to see this atrocity was to me a softer excuse than the fact that I was fast getting weary.

Such civilized people these Chinese: they wait for the little green man; they only smoke in demarcated areas; no one talks above conversational tone; the streets are squeaky clean and the green spots and gardens that align the street ways are topiary-trimmed. (And so thin – but, wait, Vietnam is still to come!)

I shared the cobbled streets with myriad other travellers all out enjoying the splendour of these southern shores and spent a while at the (replicated using original material) Blake Pier watching ferries and catamarans afloat before returning to Hong Kong Central via Happy Valley Road. Another Star Ferry ride to the north side, up Nathan Road, having passed the Peninsula Hotel on Salisbury Road – the link point for those taking the Orient Express – then into Kimberley Road, my mind swamped with names such as Versace, Rolex, Tiffany and other mega-millionaire boutiques.

The two hours I spent at the Hong Kong History Museum were far too short to absorb the amazing exhibition from Prehistoric Hong Kong to Modern Metropolis and the Return to China and I simply didn't have the time to take in the Science Museum. Another time.



(The Hong Kong Jockey Club)

For my second breakfast - and I am getting bold – I go native: congee (like mielie rice gruel, but tasty) which is served with a sprinkling of nuts and finely chopped spring onions (don't knock it till you've tried it!). Decisions, decisions: the Peak or Lamma/Landau Islands. I settled for the former but thick mist prevented me, as did my fear of heights, from taking the funicular to the very top. The bus ride in itself is pretty scary albeit with fantastic views.

I love Hong Kong. It's vibrant yet disciplined, clean but not pristine; it bustles but doesn't crowd me – and everything works, including its inhabitants. Very few beggars and the womenfolk sweep the streets. Oh, South Africa!



The group embarking on the tour, under the leadership of Guo Hongmei ("You can call me Mei or Ramona"; we settle for Mei) is small: Janet from New Zealand and Seaghan (pronounced Sean) from Ireland. Our first overnight is on a soft sleeper and he is teased unmercifully about having to sleep with three strange women and one on top to boot! The complimentary coach transfer to the Magnolia Hotel meanders through glorious countryside, rice paddy fields running up to the karst peak foothills. Yangshuo is a pretty little town with quaint, cobbled streets. Just a pity it's raining and cold, which leads me to stock up on winter clobber. (How did I manage to get the trainers knocked down from RMB229 to 99?).



And it is here that we have our first cookery school soon gets the hang of chopping spring onion without culminated in the nine of us on the course sitting (labour? There was absolutely nothing to it. Now to bamboo steamer back to myself?)

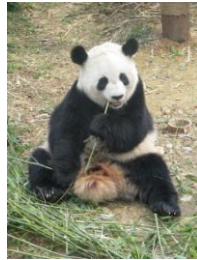


experience. Reluctant Seaghan cutting his fingers. A delightful 2+ hours down together to enjoy the fruits of our labour work out how can I mail a wok and a 5-tier



way the city fathers have seen designed along ancient lines – see both the Giant Panda and Research Base I could happily the experience of enjoying the endear me to this city What I courtesy of the fast train to

A highlight was the trip down the Li River aboard a curved-bottom, open-sided, canopy-topped barge. For all of three hours we putt-putted through spectacular karst peaks with a break onshore to mingle with local vendors. (I declined the opportunity of being photographed with a Cormorant on my arm.)



Although Chengdu is an attractive city – and I do like the to it that any new buildings are truth be told that if it wasn't to the Red Panda at the Breeding have given it a miss. And even famous Sichuan hot pot didn't did love was the over 600 km trip Chongqing in just on two hours.



(Mei and Seaghan tuck into hotpot)



Next is the trip down the Yangzi River on the *East King*, a superior tourist boat, through the Three Gorges: Qutang, Wu and Xiing. During the safety drill director Teddy chirps, "If you can't find a life jacket ... tough! Grab onto an onion ring". We are invited to sit in on Dr Ye's demonstration of acupuncture, the art of Chinese silk embroidery and how to discriminate between sea- and oyster-pearls, but the highlight was the outride on the trackers' boats. (Pity they don't go native (read naked) anymore.) Hey man, these reed-thin but ever so strong men have a tough life; first they tote a boatload of fatty foreigners 3 km upstream for 2 hours) and finally they have to climb a goddam gorge to reach home. No wonder they fall asleep in the gravy!

Sadly the transition through the locks is aborted and instead we are transported to the airport and fly to Shanghai where preparations are under way for the World Expo which is soon to open there. I love this city with its mix of art deco and the modern Pudong (financial centre) across the river. Our four-star hotel is in a great location very near the Suzhou Creek, a tributary of the Huangpu River on which The Bund (*right*) is situated which, as anyone knows, is the place to be seen at night when its all lit up. One of the highlights of my stay here is the Yu Fing Acrobats. What energy and what pleasure the performers took in rousing the audience to the edge of their seats.



In no time at all by fast train we reach Hangzhou, a picturesque city in the heart of the Longjing green tea-growing plantations. Once again Intrepid comes up trumps as we are taken into the fields themselves to pick our very own leaves and watch the process of preparing the tea to be shipped and poured at tea parties worldwide. Our dedicated driver provided much of the explanation of harvesting, processing, roasting and ultimately partaking of the result of infused leaves.

On a walk through the forested area I am approached their lunch and who felt beholden to foist on me two (in my mind they were not even remotely so), an apple but I stopped them short of wrapping a jacket around hospitality of this wonderful Asian world. Back at the lunch: six dishes of fish, chicken, bamboo shoot, inimitable rice. I still gasp at Mei's ability to store it all



by two women who are enjoying packets of vacuum-packed edibles and tissues to clean up my dribble, my shoulders. Such is the tea house a local family served us cabbage and celery and the in that little frame of hers.



The starting point of the Silk Road to Central Asia and Europe aeons ago, Xi'an is of course home to the Terracotta Warriors, one of the highlights of my trip. Little did the same big bad emperor, one Qin Shi Huangdi, who pioneered the construction of the Great Wall realise that he would leave behind one of the world's most significant archaeological discoveries. For a tour of this archaeological treasure trove we are placed in the capable hands of local tour guide Jim Dang who also



arranges a trip for us to the miniature warriors the next day but, sadly, because of a visit by the French president Nicholas Sarkozy, we are not allowed in and are turned away by his bodyguards. (The way France played in the World Cup Soccer, they shouldn't be allowed out!)

The ancient Imperial city of in the world during the Tang surrounded by 14 km of over by the Bell Tower in the overlooking the Muslim days there, but personally I further day exploring this interesting historical sites



Xi'an – once the largest city Dynasty (618-907 AD) – is Ming walls and is watched middle and the Drum Tower Quarters. We had three could have happily spent a fascinating city with many and which also turned out to

be a great shopping Mecca. And it is here that I learned an interesting thought: Xi'an is the capital of the past; Beijing is the capital of the present; and Shanghai is the capital of the future. How true.



With a population of over 15 million people, Beijing, the capital of the People's Republic of China and situated in north eastern China, is the final port of call. Not only was it home to 34 emperors, it also housed the world's greatest athletes during the 2008 Olympic Games and the Bird's Nest – a 91 000 seat arena – was used for the opening and closing ceremonies. Together with over three hundred thousand other locals, I spent Labour Day (1 May) on Tiananmen Square where single-child families happily and peacefully went about the business of enjoying this annual holiday together. Then together with Lily as our day guide we explored the Forbidden City. Again I was struck by the cleanliness of this city and how encouraging to see their efforts in greening the boulevards and walkways; the Chinese are clearly endeavouring to turn around their carbon footprint.

Home to about four million citizens, the hutongs are a charming reminder of days long gone, but are making way for more modern structures. We had fun traversing the narrow alleyways, but were rather disappointed in the lacklustre way the buildings have been allowed to be renovated rather than restored.



In the pre-reading I had read that "Intrepid is committed to a style of travel that is environmental, culturally and socially responsible which means conserving the areas visited and bringing positive benefits to local communities". With this in mind we visited the School for People with Learning Disabilities (read mentally challenged) where we were treated to tea and a concert. Having a grandchild with a disability made this very personal. I was touched to be given artworks done by the children. It is also encouraging to know that my donation will be matched by Intrepid Travel dollar for dollar.



My expectations of the Great Wall, which westwards from the mountain ridges north only was Mutianyu in itself a beautiful blossoms filled the air. Local guide Lily to complete and with more than a million construction, she says it was built with the people. She leads us up and down one was amused at Seaghaz's comment that forever be a flight of stairs.



traverses some 8 000 kilometres of Beijing - were exceeded. Not section, but the scent of peach explains that it took 1600 years workers losing their lives in its blood and tears of the Chinese staircase after the other and I his memories of China will



Ironically we completed our tour of China with a Western meal (and not the promised Peking duck which both Janet and Seaghan were not keen on, having heard its very fatty) on our last night together and then sadly it was farewell to excellent travelling companions, but for me it wasn't goodbye, as I was now about to embark on yet another and which turned out to be definitely the best leg of my Intrepid journey.



I flew from Beijing and, with a few days on my own in Hanoi, I set about tackling those parts of the city that were listed as optional activities, the Army Museum being one of them. I also discovered the historical and cultural vestige Van Miêu-Quốc Tu' Giám (my but they spell funny!) which was "dedicated to sages and Confucian scholars and used for training talented men for the nation". I also joined up with a group of 14 other tourists for a day trip to, inter alia, the

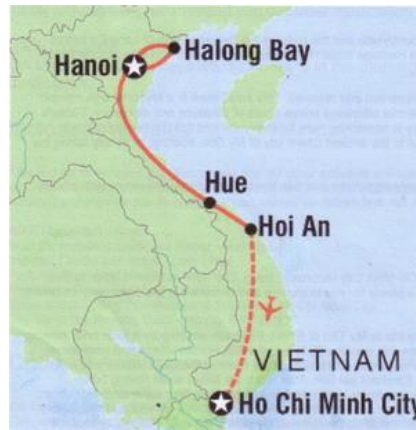


Presidential Palace ('Ho Chi Minh's vestige') and the Museum of Ethnology. I was anything but immodestly dressed but, because my arms were bare, I was barred from entering Ho chi Minh's Mausoleum. Seen one body, seen 'em all, I say.

Together with an American of my vintage who, through pressure brought to bear by his family, signed up and served in the Vietnam War and who had returned to this country for the first time since 1975 to put to rest the demons he has toted these 35 years, we visit the Hanoi Hilton (Aka "Hoa Lo" and "Maison Centrale") prison and so I am allowed to share his pain as he confronts his past and his decision to spend the next year in Hue, a city he has fallen completely in love with. He has a love thing going with the Vietnamese and I am about to learn just how intimate this can get.

Read on ...

**PART 2: INTREPID'S VSF SPIRIT OF VIETNAM SOUTHBOUND
10 DAYS FROM 5 TO 14 MAY 2010**



Not only is a tour dependent on the group but also on its leader and in Phuong we had simply the best. This little man's love for his country and passion for his work showed in every step of my sojourn through Vietnam. On the first night together we dine at Ngon



(which means good) where Phuong introduces Simon (Jess's partner and the only male of the group of seven) to a most disgusting pudding and, albeit "steam sticky rice marinated with honey" (sic), the texture is like chewing on jellyfish (which means not good!).



My love affair with Vietnam begins with a cup of the most beautiful coffee I have ever tasted – at Highlands Coffee House where I learn that the country is ranked third in the world for its production and quality of its coffee. It's swelteringly hot so today its iced coffee which comes with my order for a ham and cheese croissant which, by my reckoning, works out to R35,00. I could live here!



On board double-decker feast for the taste buds and no!" as yet placed before companions but this fat, old climb to the top Halong Bay Dragon").



Pearls of wooden eyes and a there are another us. But my work off all lady tackle of the World ("Bay of the Phuong and



the Sea, a junk, lunch is a temptation to the gasps of "Oh creation is travelling that food and all the humungous Heritage site at Descending I, however, show

them up as we race them through the caves in our two-team kayak. I surprised even myself! A swim in the Bay and an iced Tiger afterwards never tasted so good!

And just when we thought we couldn't eat another banquet to beat the band. It took all of our too: vegetables and fruit carved in the shapes of considered a good group because as a reward invited to join the crew downstairs – and they are rice vodka shooters being passed round (someone cleaning spirits').



thing, there before us is laid out a willpower not to eat the decorations birds and boats. We are apparently Simon and Phuong ("No women!") are welcome to it as we girls watch the chirps, 'Their food- and engine-

Back on the coach Mr Hill again proves to be an able driver and with a happy house stop at a ceramics factory (how can I justify that 4-level dolphin statue as hand luggage on the flight home?) we are soon back at our Hanoi hotel in time to take in a last form of entertainment, the Thăng Long Water Puppets show, before the overnight train journey to Hue. And it is in Hue, on the banks of the scenic Perfume River and Phuong's hometown, that our guide pulls out all the stops and exposes us to everything that Intrepid holds dear by way of its social responsibility programme.

Knowing my penchant for coffee, Phuong leads us to a street café where aromatic elixir bubbles up from a cup and I am in my element. Gee, but these Vietnamese know their beans and its no wonder they're the world's third largest producers of coffee. Then helmeted and onto the backs of motorbikes; my driver's name is Toi so of course I can claim to have my own toy-boy.

And talking of toys to an orphanage. have their palms pyjamas (“My to the States after Deb exactly the equally delightful pyjamas (maybe some sort of harvesting and working rice.



we stock up at a local shop At the happy house stop two read by the most delightful American soldier dumped me the War”) who proceeds to same good fortune. Across old and stooped woman – this I’m wrong and they’re not custom wear) – describes the



before our visit of the group lady in pink and returned tell Ruth and the bridge an time in purple pyjamas, but process of

We meet a woman of 42 who has been making good arm and the stump of her right arm, a Orange. Using a tiny protuberance of finger to hold sews the raffia hats which she sells to eke out a Claimed to be the most toxic herbicide spray yet 50 mix of two chemicals, known conventionally as product was mixed with kerosene or diesel fuel and hand spraying. An estimated 19 million gallons the war.



conical hats since 10 using her left deformity caused by the terrible Agent a needle, which she then threads and living thereby supporting her family. made by man, Agent Orange is a 50-2,4,D and 2,4,5,T. The combined dispersed by aircraft, vehicle, and were used in South Vietnam during



The orphanage is both heartbreaking and a joy to visit where we can feel the love emanating from the people who given their lives to running it. The little tyke that I hold must be teething because all she wants to do is chew on my spectacles.

Phuong leads us up to the bunker site overlooking the infamous Hamburger Hill and only here does his sheer patriotism shine through as he stomps on the roof of a tunnel – and we join him.

The incense-maker is a light moment in an emotional morning and we each take turns to make our own joss-stick.



Back at the hotel one of our travelling companions discovers that her passport is missing and is understandably in a helluva state (wouldn't you be?), but Phuong takes this setback in his stride (and, remember its Sunday) only finds the fifth police station he calls on prepared to help him with the necessary temporary documentation. He admits later that this is the first time he's been saddled with a lost passport and from the calm manner in which he addressed the problem we wouldn't have guessed it. What a little pro!

Hue offers much by way of antiquity and which I learn from Mr Chu, owner of the Mandarin Café. Six of the photographs that I purchase from this able photographer will hang in my home reminiscent of three very happy days in this city.

The afternoon visit is a tour of the Imperial Citadel, once the royal residence of the kings of Vietnam. During the American incursion many of the temple buildings and relics were badly damaged – if not completely destroyed – and the area is now under reconstruction. On the walk back through town we pass vendors selling army dog collars, bullets and other warfare accoutrements. It made me so sad and I consider what a mother must think if she comes across her son's metal ID tag.



(Phuong's bite is worse than his bark)



George and Courteney had told me about the royal banquet but little did I realise what delights awaited us. Simon and I were nominated king and queen for the evening and accordingly attired. No adjectives can describe the beauty of the meal; one creation after another followed: a swan (a phoenix?), a cock, a sampan, each carved out of vegetables and fruit and every appraising nod and accompanying “ooh” and aahs” attested to the culinary and artistic skills of a master chef. The musicians kept us entertained on



their traditional instruments, which Phuong says take 10 years to master – and when have you ever heard of using demitasse cups as castanets?

A very long and hot day rewarding swim at the Jillian (whose passport who is understandably Loretta, to join us and bikers playing the game. The tummy bug group (Phuong sweetly through the eye of a needle”) and so cooling off at the beach is a great option.



culminates in a beach. We it is that has distraught) and they happily sit inimitable card has crept up on calls it,



ride to and a persuade been lost and her sister, watching our gambling a couple of the “Shitting

Back on the road again (sings John Denver) on May 10 and through the Hai An Pass (built and finished by the Americans in 2005) to Hoi An, the first stop of the afternoon being a family of local tailors where orders are placed for all manner of haute couture to be collected a mere 24 hours later, as are the handmade shoes the group orders, and the goods prove to be beyond expectations. The Phii Thinh II Hotel is lovely and – joy of joys – has a pool to boot and, in between forays to the myriad shops that abound here, will be well used.



Helmets on, we straddle motorbikes (pillion riders, of course) for a trip to My Son, a World Heritage site located about 40km from Hoi An, with its remains of the red brick towers and sanctuaries from when the Cham people lived there.



Back in town Gioan (or Chop-Chop as we for our two-hour lesson in the art of and, boy, can they! We are led through shown how to select the correct tomatoes and all manner of other lovely shall lovingly and obediently (so would you clever she brandishes) chop-chop under



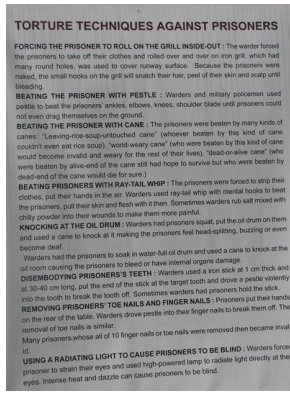
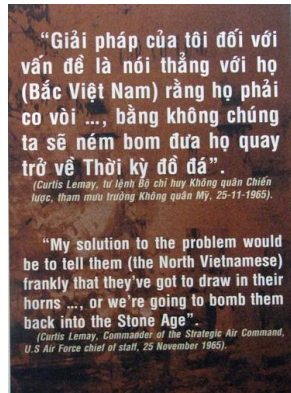
refer to her) collects us Vietnamese cooking ... the local market and pineapples and ingredients which we when you see the her guidance.

The flight from Da Nang Airport gets us to Ho Chi Minh City where we kick off with a pancake lunch. The idea of a hot meal at midday doesn't appeal to me at all but what is served is nothing like the pancake that I've ever eaten. I order hearts of palm, shrimps and squid filling and Phuong shows us how to wrap it in lettuce leaves and dip the roll in a fish sauce cum-onion and garlic and chilli dip. Washed down with sugar and lime stirred into soda water is another very "same-same, but different", very delectable eating experience.



(Making faces with the top of a coconut)

Now it's into cyclos for a Museum. It is very advice that, "Whatever put it all behind you", but reconciliation – or as that has brought this to this point, one of move ahead resolutely. concern for my welfare and enquiring if I am OK my head as a gesture of protect me from the



visit to the War Remnants difficult to heed Phuong's you feel, when you leave, it is this very spirit of they term it, reunification – warm and wonderful nation forgiveness and a drive to Baa, my driver, shows his by gripping my shoulder and he places his hat on kindness as well as to relentless sun.



What I view in the Museum is more shocking than I could ever have imagined and I feel very angry at the bulls**t propaganda dished out by the Americans to justify their insurgence into Vietnam. The atrocities are too terrible to contemplate, the patriotism unwavering, their forgiveness not easy to understand. Our cyclo tour takes us past the Art Museum to the Reunification Palace itself, then to the Catholic Church ("Notre Dame") and into what is now the post office – with its lovely architecture, the ceiling of which was designed by Frenchman Gustav Eiffel.



We are all very disturbed and the thought of a joyous dinner out tonight is the last thing on our minds, but Phuong knows what's good for us and we respond by having a good time and his antics at trying on Loretta's blonde wig have us in stitches. For dinner he's selected a private room in a sushi bar where we are waited on and feted by attentive staff who bring all manner of Eastern delicacies to our table.



It's our last day together and it also Ruth it on the Mekong Delta, Vietnam's rice of education at a brickfields, a family work and still the labourers find it within coconut farm where the production line is one of the many tributaries where we peer folk. I can now include a tuk-tuk ride to takes us to an open-air restaurant and we manner of delicacies are placed before us work out (and no one asks) what the deep-



from Canada's 22nd birthday and we spend bowl. Luang, a local guide, begins our day concern, literally hot and back-breaking their hearts to smile and wave. From the explained to us onto a longtail boat down into the lives of these hard-working river my ever-growing list of transport which are welcomed with iced drinks and all for our midday meal. No one can quite fried batter is hiding, but it's delicious.

Luang walks us through pine and apple plantations to the river's edge where we board rowing boats that take us back to the longtail boat. We're reaching the end of our journey in more ways than one and the sudden shower seems to sense our somber mood, the final educational being a stop at the local coconut candy makers – again, a family business – where we watch dexterous fingers packing the delicacies into candy wraps.

One again Phuong and which, as order Taco her little black simply adds to her purple-and-white iced cake bedecked have seen to it that darkened room. up from the



has chosen a wonderful restaurant within walking distance of the hotel promised, serves Vietnamese, Mexican and Italian food – and, no, I don't Tagliatelle! We dress for the occasion, Ruth looking particularly lovely in number and her Ha Long Bay pearls. The pink Marguerita she sips on sophistication and charm. Dear Phuong has organised a basket of orchards interspersed with deep mauve carnations. The surprise is an with lit candles (I didn't count but, knowing his professionalism, he would there were 22) which I am honoured to be asked to carry in to the Surprise, surprise ... and happy birthday sung by all with the tune floating downstairs karaoke system. Fitting.



Farewells are never easy and as a group we've melded well, making it that much more difficult to part company. Phuong doesn't help matters when he explains that he intends using the donation we have all contributed to (in addition to the tip we give him) to help a mentally impaired 65-year-old woman simply to get through another tough and tenuous day of existence. Not too many dry eyes around the table and I am asked to propose the toast to this fine young man whom I shall always think of as 'this little man with the big heart' (right). Thank you, Intrepid; there are apparently 40-plus other group leaders we could have been allocated and we hit pay dirt!

With a few days on my own in Ho Chi Minh City I opt for a day tour first to the Cu Chi tunnel system at Bêñ Dũoc, which is an historic vestige site covering 200km and where over two hundred thousand Viet Cong lived for nearly 20 years. It stands as a true monument to the resilience and loyalty of the Zone Party People and the High Command of Sài Gòn.



(The trapdoor down into the tunnels)



(Hai Dang explains the intricate system)



Next we visit the Martyr Memorial Temple - just in time for noon prayers – which forms part of the centre for five religions: Buddhism, Confucianism, Taoism, Hinduism and Christianity. It was built on a land site of 70 000 m² (between May 1993 and December 1995) to celebrate the 20th Anniversary of the liberation of the South and the unification of the country. My travelling companions for the day are nine Asian-Australians who are more concerned about whether the bottled water's properly sealed and are not at all keen to eat from the lunch lovingly prepared in the simple kitchen by a local family.

Perhaps they can't come to terms with their roots. Or maybe they got a peek into the kitchen where the food was being prepared? (The far picture depicts a That Cho (or Koy) restaurant ("We serve dog") which thankfully wasn't on the menu this particular day.



I am smitten: I have fallen in love with the people of Vietnam; I love their culture, I love their warmth, I love their humour and I love their food. It is therefore with a sad heart that I say goodbye, but in so doing I know that I will return again one day to further explore this great land. Tam Biêt.

**PART 3: INTREPID'S KSE THE ROAD TO ANGKOR
9 DAYS FROM 16 TO 24 MAY 2010**

My ultimate adventure is from Ho Chi Minh City to Bangkok (or so I thought). The group is again small, only five of us – Lara from Christchurch, Rob and Irene from London, Darren from Sydney and me - under the guidance of Dino who also proves to be a good source of knowledge and on the six-hour coach trip to Phnom Penh he shares much of what his country is all about and the hardships its people have suffered at the hands of the Khmer Rouge and today more than 50% of its people are under 18 years of age. But this young nation is rallying; it is business as usual and the locals welcome tourists with open arms, making it a special place to travel in.



The coach is nothing like the public transport I expected it to be and made for a very comfortable albeit long (7-hour) ride through the border crossing – destination Phnom Penh, the capital of Cambodia, which stands at the confluence of the Tonte Sap, Tonte Bassic and Mekong Rivers and home to 1,5 million inhabitants. Probably because every 'normal' tourist only purchases their visa at the border gate, the e-visa that I bought prior to my departure causes consternation with the authorities and there's a bit of a delay – not to mention wet pants! But it all gets sorted out in the wash and we're soon on the road again, stopping only for lunch at a local eaterie. The strip of road from the border post is lined with one casino after the other and a seriously long stretch limousine is parked waiting to tote prospective losers to the tables. Dino explains that gambling is very controlled on the 'Nam side so aspirants slip across the border in the hopes of meeting up with Lady Luck.



I add another means of list: a ferry which takes our coach tanker, bikes, cyclos, cars and cart across the Mekong River. vendors are women selling trays to be roasted cicada beetles (see



conveyance to my plus a petrol road even a horse-and-Amongst the of what we work out *what's in the tray*).

Settled into the Sokha Guest House, Dino then leads us through the central market where we stock up on all manner of fruits which will form the basis for our breakfasts for the next few mornings. Per cyclos we head across town to Wat Phnom, the big Buddha monument (Phnom - mountain, or hill - and Penh – lady; therefore, lady of the hill). Flashes of lightning across the Tonlé Sap River promise a break in the sweltering heat, but (no pun intended) I don't bank on it.

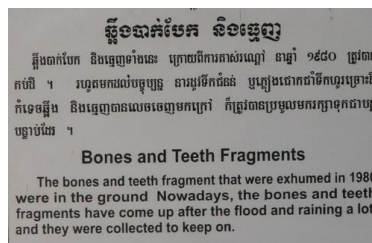


(Note the vulture ... waiting)

The tough day, May 18, has arrived and our local guide, Mr Rim, has briefed us on what to expect at Tuon Sleng (Aka S21), but nothing could have prepared me for the horror I was to see within those walls, the brainchild of Pol Pot (short for political potential). And just when I can't take any-more we come face to face with Mr Chum Mey who was one of the seven survivors when the regime was overthrown and conditions there uncovered. Being a mechanic, his skills were very much needed, but even he didn't escape the atrocities and was tortured by having his toenails pulled out and electric shocks administered through his left ear.



Next the Choeung Ek Genocidal Centre or Memorial Charnel (aka The Killing Fields) and the place where over 8 000 skulls are housed in a 17-tier stupa as a visual memory of 5 years of living hell till



1979 when the Khmer Rouge were toppled. Estimates of the number of dead are around 2 million out of around 7 million citizens, victims of the Pol Pot (political potential) regime, the upshot of which is that today 80% of the population of the country is under the age of 30. The video screened in the museum section was very informative and helped put Campuchia into better perspective. Before I embarked on this trip I knew very little about this country and its history and I have some serious research to read up on now that I am back home.

The high humidity had my hair plastered to my neck and a haircut was called for and, recalling the row of street barbers I'd seen on our orientation outing near the market, I set forth determinedly. Dino had warned me, "Don't pay more than \$1.50 for a cut", which is precisely what I offered the man who obliquely responded, "\$1". This for sure is bartering in reverse and I was so pleased with the cut that I happily forked out \$2 and I thought he would kiss my feet!





tarantula spiders – is less anything that we can't readily beautiful young girl, thinking I be?



A long journey to Siem Reap the next day is broken by a stopover at a silkworm/weaving farm. The local is married to an American and together they've established an industry that employs 17 people and supports however many more. The pit stop to view the local delicacy – deep fried enticing and in fact we avoid eating identify. I buy palm fruit from a they are meringues. How wrong can



We enter Siem Reap via the oldest bridge in Cambodia, but for the moment are oblivious to the antiquity of the town, so keen are we to dive into the welcoming waters of the hotel's pool. Refreshed we settle into tuk-tuks which take us to the night market and a restaurant with a live traditional dance team and music. For US\$4 its cocktail hour ('buy one, get one free', which we all do with alacrity) and afterwards immerse our feet in a Dr Fish foot spa, which is rather like piranha nibbling away at your undersoles, but much more enjoyable as it comes with a beer thrown in.



And now temple Angkor meaning 'Capital City' or that between 12th AD) of the dominant



begins our tour of Wat 'Capital 'Holy City' existed the 9th and centuries Khmer, the ethnic



group in modern and ancient Cambodia. Without Archaeological Park, a World Heritage site, embraces dozens of temple ruins of which Angkor and Bayon are the most notable. We are punished with a 04:00 rising but are treated to a sunrise over Angkor Wat which I can only describe as breathtaking (although it didn't photograph well). Then onto Ta Som and Ta Prohm, each of them glorious manifestations of years and a lifestyle gone



Man, it's hot and an outing on the water to the floating village – filthy waters and all – holds much appeal and so we happy-chappies chug-chug along past schools, churches, battery and boating businesses, accosted along the way by purveyors of pythons et al, to a local mariculture operation where I, balk at captive crocs destined to become someone's belt or shoes. Like



South isn't Vietnam's ("They're so loud and it's a way of the locals.

South



(Darren's not interested!)

Africa that immune to xenophobia; here too the influx of getting hold of our land") tests the mettle of



On to coach; even aboard happens right up personal through into the souls of



Battambang by outside it gets hotter, but tuk-tuks it all and we get close and tucking villages and lives and very the real



Cambodians – and they're such a friendly lot. This particular product is made fresh every day to be eaten with curry. A mother is rubbing her child's chest with tiger balm ("The genuine stuff, not the so-called makes-you-horny stuff") to release the toxic germs. The more effective, the redder the skin becomes and Dino says the procedure is very painful.



We watch how sticky rice and black beans are stuffed into bamboo pieces, which is then baked over a slow fire. The peeled-back bamboo reveals a delicious mix, but why we have to savour this before our next stop – a fish paste factory – is questionable. This foul-smelling, unhygienic so-called delicacy is purportedly is to be found in every Cambodian home and exported widely. Each to his own. The family that produces rice paper – the kind that is used to make spring rolls – has closed up for the day, but happily explain the process they follow. I can't recall the figures, but they have to make one hell of a lot of this flimsy product to get a mere dollar a day. Thank you, God, for sparing me the fate of

having been born a Cambodian or, worse, an animal there.

An awesome ride on a bamboo train shakes our bones. Built by the French in the 19th century, this is the lifeline for the rural community to get produce to and from the town/city markets using this flatbed rail system. If two loaded trains from opposite directions should meet, the lighter load is unloaded and the flatbed plus wheels simply lifted off the line to let the other through. Simple.



Bath hosts our evening meal in his home and which is prepared by the females of his family – that's how it is. Born in 1970 he can still recall the terrible years and does carry a lot of bitterness, indeed hatred, in his heart – and who can blame him? Over the delicious five-course meal Bath tells us how his life has progressed from tending rice paddys to using his ability and skill in English (self-taught) to translate for TV programs. All he wants now is for his son to progress to university (granny wants him to be a doctor).



Not long out of the town our driver spots a wedding cortege and pulls over for us to photograph. The next thing slip covers are pulled over chairs that miraculously appear from nowhere and we are told to sit; we are the party envelope which is a family. We expected - festivities. I weddings in Siem Reap am quite overcome; I now have a photo from all three of the countries I have visited. With still hours away, we have to refuse the invitation to stay for the meal.



(Rob, Irene, Lara, Joel & Dino)



(Rob watches Irene's haircut)



(Barbeque-style last supper)



The name's Lucille – not Marguerita!

Darren says farewell and heads for pastures new, leaving four of us to enjoy the relief of Freedom Hotel's pool and the final dinner of the tour with Dino and a friend, dining on Amok and other Cambodian delicacies. In fact, Sunday May 23 is our last night together and, spurred on by Lara, the four of us hit town where Rob and Irene risk their all in having a haircut in the marketplace. We find a delightful street restaurant selling barbeque foods - kebabs, octopus, prawns – which we yummily wash down with 700 ml bottles of Tiger but, not enough, we hit the cocktail beat for a farewell splurge.



(Tuk-tuk to the airport)

There are promises of keeping in touch and certainly I will send pics of my travelling companions to them and, who knows, maybe we'll bump into each other again in Asia because, for sure, I will be returning to this fascinating part of the world – and definitely under the guidance of Intrepid. In fact, so impressed am I that I'm planning a trip to Bali via Ashleigh of their Johannesburg office on whose sage advice I have come to depend. Roll on 2011!