

Cambodia_Vietnam_Japan_2014

Who helped us and where we stayed in Thailand, Cambodia, Vietnam and Japan:

Travel Agent Susie Masters:

Susy was invaluable as she arraigned our personal guides in Siem Reap and Saigon and found the fabulous hotels in both Siem Reap and Saigon. We never use a "travel agents" until this trip but we HIGHLY recommend Suzie's services. This trip would have been much more difficult or much less enjoyable if it had not been for her.

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Places we stayed

Hotel Novotel Bangkok Suvarnabhumi Airport in Bangkok Thailand.

Was a very nice one-night stop over hotel. Very convenient, clean, comfortable and easy transportation.

Sofitel Angkor Phokeethra Golf & Spa Resort in Seam Reap Cambodia.

This is among the very finest hotels we have ever stayed at in the world (and we have stayed at many). It was inexpensive (~\$225/night) for a luxurious room with patio facing a beautiful garden with lotus-filled pond, a huge, beautiful swimming pool with attached bar, three fine restaurants and a staff of very sweet, beautiful workers with very good English. All food is safe to eat.

AMA Waterway river boat La Marguerite down the Mekong River is a wonderful transport. Our cabin was very space-efficient and large enough to be comfortable. The AC worked well which was important with the 100 F temperatures and high humidity. It had a wonderfully cool swimming pool with all drinks covered. Relaxing with other guests was a real pleasure in the heat on the many comfortable chaise lounge chairs under a covered canopy. The staff were all extremely helpful and sweet and the food just excellent. You can eat any of the food on the boat without worry.

Caravelle Hotel in Saigon (Ho Chi Min City).

This is a fabulous hotel with a spectacular view of the old and new city. It is in the center of the old French district across from the Opera House. We stayed on the "executive" floor and the lounge had a full dinner buffet that was spectacular with Western and Vietnamese offerings. You truly did not need to go out for dinner if you are staying there. We highly recommend it.

Swissôtel in Osaka Japan.

This is our home away from home, having stayed there many times. We book the executive floor, which gives us access to the lounge. It is less than an hour from the kids by train and taxi and is in the Namba area of Osaka, which is like the heart of that wonderful city.

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Trip Summary

This trip was magical, inspiring, informative and absolutely exhausting. Although we kept a daily log, we will not bore you with that. Rather, below is a summary of thoughts from the three segments of this adventure of the co-Hobbits: Bob and Sharon.

Cambodian Background. Cambodia was once the major power in SE Asia with artworks and city planning centuries ahead of the rest of the world in the 11th century. Then Siam (Thailand) and Vietnam whittled away at their empire. In 1863, Cambodia asked the French to come in to help protect them against Thailand. The French influence is still strong there (as in Viet Nam). In the 1970's Pol Pot and his Khmer Rouge gained control of Cambodia after political destabilization of the region from US carpet bombing of Cambodia and Laos. Pol Pot wanted to return Cambodia to its 12th century agrarian greatness by killing anyone who was educated – or wore glasses, wiping out the entire middle class leaving only the very wealthy Royalty and the impoverished. Pol Pot was able to do this in part due to the extreme isolation of the country people, who did not know what he was doing in the cities. To prevent that isolation from happening again; now every household has a TV, Internet access and cell phones. Even the poorest shacks have satellite dishes but only 40% have toilets!

Today the Cambodian people are sweet, hard working and physically beautiful. They are very spiritual with Buddhism the largest religion. Very many people also have Animism Shrines (“Spirit Houses”), which they use to remember their ancestors and respect nature. Siem Reap is a wonderful city with bustling Tuk-tuk drivers (motor bikes with two-person carts behind) local markets, scenic buildings and beautiful people and cute children everywhere. It is sometimes hard to cross a street, but the feeling is one of chaotic exuberance rather than disorder. Everywhere you see hard working sellers of every possible commodity with overly exuberant hawkers which would have been pests had they were not been so cute. There were some very nice shops mixed in with the tourist junk.

Our Cambodian Adventure: We spent the first four days touring the many temples north of Siem Reap using a wonderful guide **Seng Hak (senghakthan@yahoo.com)** who was energetic, knowledgeable and an excellent teacher.

We stayed at the **Sofitel Angkor Phokeethra**, which was luxurious with a large room, patio, great swimming pool and three excellent restaurants. The food was safe to eat. The staff were all very helpful and sweet. We HIGHLY recommend this fine hotel.

Siem Reap is a vibrant, active town well worth visiting. Hire a Tuk-Tuk driver for the day and enjoy this city.

Central Market: One to miss. As it was too crowded, hot and aimed at tourists.

Tuggu; A marvelous clothing store on Pokambor Avenue (near Pub Street) with wonderful clothes.

Alley West at the Sivutha Boulevard has several fine art galleries that were fun to tour (they had AC!!!). Some of the art was very high quality.

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Some of the Temples we toured:

Angkor Wat: Angkor Wat (means "City of Temples") was built by the Khmer King Suryavarman II in the early 12th century with construction stopping shortly after his death with some of the bas reliefs left unfinished. It was the capital of the Khmer Empire (Cambodia) and stretched for many square miles, having a population of about 1 million people by the mid 13th century. It eventually became indefensible against Siam (Thailand) and had over-stretched its environment. After being attacked by Siam in 1432, the capital was moved to **Phnom Penh**. Angkor Wat remained in very limited use, but changing from Hindu to Buddhist, whose monks have maintained it ever since. The large mote held back the jungle, where all other temples in the area were totally covered and lost to the forest.

The architecture and sculptures are absolutely breath-taking. The vistas, statuary and history told in the carvings were so fine and detailed... yet all are unsigned, having been done for the devotion to the Hindu God Vishnu and the King.

Bayonne: This complex is composed of many hundreds of smiling Buddha's and was dedicated to the Buddhist King Jayavarman VII's mother in the late 11th century. It was the second capital of Khmer. When French archeologists found it, it had been consumed and covered by the jungle. It is now magnificently reassembled.

Ta Prohm: This is called the "Jungle Temple" because some of the trees have been allowed to remain to show how completely the jungle had covered the old temples. It was built in the Bayonne style largely in the late 12th and early 13th centuries. Some of the walls are standing largely due to the support offered by the Silk-cotton tree (*Ceiba pentandra*) and Strangler fig (*Ficus gibbosa*) tree roots.

Banteay Srei or Banteay Srey: This is the "Ladies' Citadel" built in the late 12th century and contains some of the most spectacular and delicate carvings of any of the ruins. When the French archeologists found it in the early 20th century, the top half of the complex was completely crumbled with the jungle hiding all of it. Everything you see has been re-assembled like a giant 3D jig-saw puzzle. Since all carvings were done after the blocks were stacked, the patterns gave the key to reassembly. The detail carved into the blocks is simply exquisite, with the detail having been protected by the forest from erosion.

La Margaret River Boat: We enjoyed relaxing with other guests, which was a real pleasure in the heat on the many comfortable chaise lounge chairs under a covered canopy. The staff were all extremely helpful and sweet and the food excellent. You can eat any of the food on the boat without worry.

While on this boat, there were usually two daily excursions. We attended the morning trips when it was cooler where we saw beautiful Buddhist monasteries and quaint farming villages with happy, friendly people surrounded by lush farms. In the afternoons we generally shied away from the intense heat, enjoying the company of others of like-minded by the pool and watching the river-life drive by in their small, colorful fishing boats.

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Some cautionary notes:

- 1) When taking the water taxi, sometimes water splashes on your face. That water is polluted, so wear surgical masks or a small towel to breath through on transport. Also, where native meals and candy are being prepared – you will be tempted to try it.. but just don't. Your gut will thank you.
- 2) Bring hand-held battery-powered fans. It is incredibly hot in Cambodia and Vietnam and the fans are a real pleasure to have.
- 3) Those who visited the “Killing Fields” (we did not) were emotionally traumatized by seeing the bones of those poor souls slaughtered by the Khmer Rouge sticking out of the ground everywhere. Our feeling was that by being there and loving the sight of the people who have risen like the Phoenix from those ashes honored those millions who died. Our hearts go out to them, but we are glad we did not go to the fields.
- 4) Pickpockets are sometimes a problem, so be aware (more in Vietnam than in Cambodia). There is almost no physical crime in Cambodia or Vietnam, but wanting your money or cameras is supposedly everywhere. Just accept the precautions as part of the character of the place and wear no expensive jewelry or obvious wallets hanging from your pockets. We encountered absolutely no problems or attempts. This caution was told to us by the guides.

Phnom Penh: The capital of Cambodia since 1432 (we visited from the river boat), chosen for it's good water resources (convergence of the Mekong and Tonle Sap rivers). The city is vibrant and interesting with many shops of local commerce and fine art. The central market was marvelous and well worth the visit. We hired a Tuk-tuk driver who took us to several shops Sharon found on the internet.

Viet Nam background: Viet Nam was gradually taken over by the French in the 19th century – mostly by Catholic mercenaries. They have been in a civil war against the North for about 250 years with the north populated by ethnic Chinese and the south by the slim Khmer people. There is still much dislike in the south toward the North. The American embassy is now in Hanoi and the property in Saigon is now the Consulate-General of the United States. People are friendly and welcoming.

Viet Nam: We entered Vietnam on the Mekong River and IMMEDIATELY noted that the boats changed from tiny fishing boats to much larger fishing/hauling/living and anything else boats. They are very industrious, mining sand from the bottom of the Mekong and transporting it on huge barges to make cement for bridges and buildings. Much of it is moving toward Saigon, which is a fully modern city. They harvest three crops of rice a year, making them the 2nd largest rice producer in the world with much of that coming from the Mekong Delta region. We saw very modern infrastructure from high-power lines to huge suspension bridges both completed and under construction.

Ho Chi Minh City is still called “Saigon” by the people and is a very modern city with high rises and Western style hotels everywhere. The old French hotels and Opera House were left undamaged (but re-named) by the Viet Cong. Now Saigon is a bustling city that looks like Chicago, but has millions of motor-bikes instead of cars. To walk across the street, you walk slowly into the sea of slow-moving motorcycles at a constant pace; and the bikes go around you as you make your way. It is very scary, but it works!

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Their official import and export currency is the US dollar and all shops accept (prefer) our money over the much-inflated Dong. The people are very friendly and most speak English quite well. Everything is amazingly inexpensive there including very finely crafted clothing and artworks.

Among the best shops we found in Saigon was **Em Em** gift shop at 38 Mac Thi Bui Str., Ho Chi Minh City, Dist.1 (84 8 3829 4408, <http://ofc.vn.com/emem/en/index.html>) with wonderful inexpensive but beautiful jewelry. They also had coconut purses and much more.

Seeing both Viet Nam and Cambodia rise from the ruins of war is inspirational. The Cambodians lost over 2 million people (27% of population) and the Vietnamese lost well over 5 million people (9% of population). Today they are both growing and prospering beyond all expectations. A beautiful Phoenix rising from the cinnamon ashes indeed!

Japan: We flew from Saigon the Osaka. It felt like coming home, being our ninth visit to this wonderful country. Six-year-old Luca is growing up SO FAST. We spent time with Luca and on the first of the times, she guided us from Osaka to her home in Nara... a 45-minute journey by train and taxicab. She still does not walk – only runs. So, guiding us through the four levels of subways, she would RUN 20 yards ahead, then stop, turn and smile as we approached only to RUN the next 20 yards. She showed us where to buy the tickets, and when we got confused, showed us how to push a button and man popped his head out of a window to help us! (Remember “Laugh-in?”). She gave him cookies as a “thank you” and he smiled so tenderly – no one had ever giving him cookies as thanks before). Luca is a special sort of person indeed. Once in Nara, she told the Taxi driver every turn all the way to her house. She is six, by the way – not sixteen.

Their house in Nara is very nice with our room being the “traditional” tatami mat room with paper window and door coverings. They just changed the mats, so the room smelled so fresh. The rest of the house is modern with a large dining area and a huge 12’ table and a nice upright piano. Luca is an expert at reaching things by climbing or using stools and cooks wonderfully; preparing scrambled eggs with broccoli and cheese for us. She is very mature for a 6 year old!

Kevin is becoming ever more well known in the “English Teaching” world and Mamico’s radio show is #1 in Osaka. Experiencing a glimpse of their full life there was wonderful for us to see. Bob got pneumonia (much cooler weather?) and Sharon was also not 100%, so we did not do much activity but sure loved being there. Seeing Kumico (Mamico’s mother) was very nice. As always, visits to Japan are renewing and delightful. The food, as always, is delicious.