

CAMBODIA – VIETNAM TOUR 2013

SMARTOURS

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Mike and I met a nice guy named Tony on our last adventure to Alaska. Tony was a frequent traveler and told us that he liked a company called SmarTours. Mike signed us up for e-mails from this company and I saw that they were offering a trip to Cambodia and Vietnam. I like to travel to Asian countries and asked Mike if he wanted to sign up for the trip leaving February 2013. We saw lots of interesting places that the tour was going to visit and decided to book the trip.

We met our group in Phnom Penh, the bustling capital of Cambodia and were greeted by our tour group leader who told us to call him Boeing. Other people started to gather and we met our group of 34 people. We were led to our bus and were escorted to the Intercontinental Hotel. After a good night's rest the next day we embarked on a tour of some of Phnom Penh's most outstanding sights. We went to Wat Phnom, a Buddhist temple. It is the tallest religious structure in the city. As we climbed the steps to the temple children were waiting for us with cages of swallows and other small birds. They would ask us if we wanted to pay a dollar apiece to be able to release a bird from its cage. I wish I could have afforded to pay to release all the birds. I paid a boy \$2.00 and released 2 birds. The interior of the temple had a central altar complex with a large bronze seated Buddha surrounded by other statues, flowers, candles and items of devotion and worship. Food was being prepared as offering to the Buddha. The walls are covered with murals, especially of Jataka stories of the Buddha's earlier reincarnations before his enlightenment. We then went to see the elegant National Museum and the Royal Palace.

The next day we traveled to Siem Reap, gateway to the world famous temples of Angkor Wat, among the "Seven Wonders of the World". Built by the Khmer kings, the ancient rulers of Cambodia, the exquisitely carved temples are an architectural masterpiece. Our first introduction to the complex of Angkor Wat was to visit the Southern Gate of Bayon and Angkor Thom. Most of the great Angkor ruins have vast displays of bas-relief depicting the various gods, goddesses, and other-worldly beings from the mythological stories and epic poems of ancient Hinduism (modified by centuries of Buddhism). Mingled with these images are actual known animals, like elephants, snakes, fish, and monkeys, in addition to dragon-like creatures that look like the stylized, elongated serpents (with feet and claws) found in Chinese art. It was quite a hot and humid day and after climbing the steps of the temples we enjoyed getting back into our air-conditioned bus. We were taken to a scenic spot to yet another temple to climb to the top to watch the sun set along with many other tourist and locals.

The next morning we traveled to Kampong Kleang and enjoyed a relaxing boat trip on Tonle Sap Lake. We were visiting during the dry season and were awestruck by the forest of stilted houses rising up to 10 meters in the air. Being an active fishing community we saw lots of people drying fish and going about their daily activities. Our group boarded a boat that was awaiting our arrival. The boat took us to the lake and we

saw people fishing, clamming and farming on the shore. We saw fascinating floating fishing villages out on the lake. The people were friendly as we passed, they kept smiling as cameras were clicking away taking pictures. Two young boys on board were assisting the captain with the boat. One of the boys took a liking to Mike and I and started giving us personal massages. I didn't discourage him but wiggled a few times as he would hit a sore spot on my neck. I tipped him a dollar when we arrived back at our dock. They learn fast how to make a buck. We later returned to Siem Reap to further explore the "Angkor Conservation Complex". We were to visit the largest, best preserved Angkor temple. After crossing the bridge we entered the main building and went through a series of galleries and courtyards before reaching the central sanctuary. We stopped several times to enjoy the intricate stone carvings that adorn nearly every surface, with some 1,700 Apsaras, or celestial dancers, sculpted into the walls. Along the outer gallery walls run the longest continuous bas-relief in the world, which narrates stories from Hindu mythology, including the famous Churning of the Ocean of Milk. Mike and I rushed to find the entrance to the largest tower to view the many statues contained within. We had to get in line for this tower along with lots of tourist and climb many steps to the top. It was worth the effort.

We started the next morning with a visit to a workshop where local artists demonstrated the art of stone carving and ornamental wood sculpture. Afterwards our guide took us to visit Banteay Srei Temple, small in comparison to the other Angkor temples, it is a jewel of classical Khmer art. Built in pink sandstone, the walls are covered in exquisitely preserved carvings of unusual delicacy. The site consists of three concentric rectangular enclosures constructed on an east-west axis. A causeway situated on the axis leads from an outer gopura, or gate, to the third or outermost of the three enclosures. The inner enclosure contains the sanctuary, consisting of an entrance chamber and three towers, as well as two buildings conventionally referred to as libraries. Banteay Srei Temple was indeed my favorite temple complex. We were then transferred to the airport for a short flight to Vietnam arriving in Saigon, now called Ho Chi Minh City to the Star City Hotel.

Sunday was our Mekong Delta excursion. We embarked on a full day excursion from Saigon to My Tho, one of the most beautiful areas of the Mekong Delta, Vietnam's most fertile agricultural center. A boat trip took us along narrow canals, passing rice fields and orchards offering a unique insight into local village life. We stopped in one village and were entertained by locals singing and serving us hot tea and snacks. A lady came to our table to offer the sale of jars of royal jelly to be used as a natural skin care product. In holistic healing circles it is a popular alternative folklore medicine, royal jelly is believed to have anti-aging properties stemming primarily from its amino acid content and broad spectrum of vitamins and minerals. I purchased a jar of bee pollen instead. Bee pollen is used to enhance energy, vitality, memory and performance, and sometimes even to reduce allergies, though there's little evidence to support any of these uses. It's considered a super food because it contains proteins and is rich in vitamins, minerals and phytochemicals. It comes from the pollen that collects on the bodies of bees. After reading about its risk of serious allergic reaction in some people I might not try it...maybe let Mike try it out first.

Next morning we traveled outside Saigon to see one of the remnants of the Vietnam War, the legendary Cu Chi tunnels, which used to serve the former Communist Guerrillas. It was a very interesting place. The tunnels of Củ Chi are an immense network of connecting underground tunnels located in the Củ Chi district of Ho Chi Minh City (Saigon), Vietnam, and are part of a much larger network of tunnels that underlie much of the country. The Củ Chi tunnels were the location of several military campaigns during the Vietnam War, and were the Viet Cong's base of operations for the Tết Offensive in 1968. The tunnels were used by Viet Cong guerrillas as hiding spots during combat, as well as serving as communication and supply routes, hospitals, food and weapon caches and living quarters for numerous guerrilla fighters. The tunnel systems were of great importance to the Viet Cong in their resistance to American forces, and helped achieve ultimate military success.

After a short propaganda movie glorifying the efforts of the Viet Cong we were taken to staged areas that housed examples of the terrifying bamboo spiked booby traps that were rigged in the tunnels to keep out the opposing side. We were shown camouflaged trap doors located in spots on the jungle floor. You would never know that a hidden entrance could be under your feet. At one time during the war a special group of soldiers called "Tunnel Rats" would venture into the tunnels and search for Viet Cong and explore their underground domain. I can't imagine anyone being brave enough to want to do this. Tourist are offered a chance to experience a short or long crawl around the safer parts of the tunnel system. Of course stupid Mike and I opted for the longer crawl. As we lined up we were told no going back once inside the tunnel. Mike went ahead of me and as soon as I entered the tunnel I wished that I had not made the decision to go. Half way in it started getting hot and the air heavy. I thought I might want to go back the way I came...but realized that is not an option. "Keep moving, keep moving", said the guide that must have been in the rear. We were duck walking as fast as we could. Mike stopped to take my picture. My camera was not working right for me to take Mike's picture and I thought 'the hell with it, just get me out of here'. Without the front guides flashlight we were left in complete darkness so I didn't want to get behind. I tried to crawl on my knees but found that was not as fast as continuing to duck walk...so I quickly dug my feet into the ground and pushed on. The tunnel seemed so small and was closing in on me. Mike turned to look at me and I saw sweat pouring from his face. I saw a guide ahead squatting by an entrance to another part of the tunnel...I said "is that a short cut". He said "No, much longer". Forget that!!! As we turned the corner I saw daylight at the end of the tunnel... "Oh thank you Lord I'm gonna get out of here". We crawled out to find laughing people awaiting their fellow idiots that decided to be tunnel rats for the day. Mike told me that his legs hurt for days doing that duck walk through the tunnel. We left to return to Saigon for a city visit of this vibrant city. Later, boarded a flight to Danang in Central Vietnam and a short ride to Hoi An, one of Vietnam's most delightful and enchanting towns. Hoi An Historic Hotel.

Vietnamese New Year, more commonly known by its shortened name Tết was being observed during our visit. Tết is also an occasion for pilgrims and family reunions. During Tết, Vietnamese visit their relatives and temples, forgetting about the troubles of the past year and hoping for a better upcoming year. They consider Tết to be the first day

of spring and the festival is often called Hội xuân (spring festival). There are a lot of customs practiced during Tết, such as visiting a person's house on the first day of the new year (xông nhà), ancestral worshipping, wishing New Year's greetings, giving lucky money to children and elderly people, and opening a shop. It was a wonderful time to be visiting Vietnam. Some of the markets and shops were closed during this holiday but it was not an issue. We found that the excitement of the holiday enhanced our stay because the cities were decorated with banners, flowers, lights and vibrant colors on all the streets and temples. The locals were out celebrating, worshipping at the temples and dressing up in their best clothes. The hotel lobbies were filled with pots of yellow and red flower trees decorated with red envelopes. The red color of the envelope symbolizes good luck and is supposed to ward off evil spirits. A red envelope or red packet contains a monetary gift of fresh new bills which is given during this holiday.

After checking into our hotel our guide took us for a walking tour of the ancient city of Hoi An and showed us some of the centuries old houses and the local marketplace. We were led to a silk shop where silk was made from the silk worm to final product. I purchased a beautiful hand embroidered silk picture. It took workers six months of labor to finish this picture of two Vietnamese women in woven boats going about their daily chores. We also went to a lacquer workshop and I found a wonderful jewelry box hand made with a modern design on the cover that I purchased. Later that day when it got dark Mike and I went to explore the town on our own. The town was buzzing with locals and tourists out to celebrate Tet and the evening. We passed the part of town where the river was. Little girls and boys were begging you to purchase a paper container with a candle lit inside. You were to place the container in the river as an offering and watch as it floated down the river. Mike stopped to buy a ear of roasted corn from a vendor. We made our way to the center of town and found lots of activity going on from bands to rides and lots of displays of colorful lanterns along the river. Everyone was having a great time.

We departed Hoi An to visit China Beach, the renowned war-time R&R resort and to see the Marble Mountains, consisting of five stone jagged crests that represent the elements of nature. We journeyed through some of Vietnam's most spectacular scenery as we traversed the Hai Van Pass and coastline views en route to Hue, the former Imperial Capital of Vietnam. Modial Hotel.

Today we went to Citadel in Hue's old city, saw the Flag Tower, Ngo Mon Gate and the Forbidden Purple City home to the Royal Family before 1945. We went transported by at least 34 trishaws. The cycle rickshaw is a small-scale local means of transport; it is also known by a variety of other names such as bike taxi, velotaxi, pedicab, bikecab, cyclo, beca, becak, trisikad, or trishaw. As we stepped out of hotel there they were lined up to take us for a tour. It was one of the most pleasant experiences that I enjoyed in this city. It was amazing as I watched my bicycle driver take me in and out of traffic. It seemed that no matter how close we got to cars, motorcycles, people, animals and market baskets full of fruits and vegetables we never hit anything. We came awful close but never had a collision. After lunch we took a scenic boat trip on the Perfume River and stopped at the famous Thien Mu Pagoda.

Next morning we flew to Hanoi and journeyed by road through the lush countryside to Halong, a vast mysterious bay with majestic scenery. Novotel Hotel.

Our tour the next day was a boat ride in Ha Long Bay widely considered as Vietnam's most spectacular natural area. It comprises of over three thousand small jagged limestone islands rising out of the South China Sea. Our four-hour boat trip stopped for us to disembark to view several island caves. The caves were unbelievable, some of the best I have ever seen. The caves were lit up with colored lights and some holes were open to the outside and let in natural light. The limestone cave called 'Sung Sot Cave (Cave of Surprise) is beautiful with granite pavements for easy walking. After our cave tour we got back on our boat and were served the most delicious lunch I had eaten on this trip so far. The lunch was made by the crew on the boat and consisted of fish, shrimp, spring rolls and local vegetables. Later we drove back to Hanoi and arrived at Moevenpick Hotel.

We explored the rich history of Hanoi which is closely tied to French colonialism as well as the Chinese era, both evident in the city's architecture, cuisine and culture. We went to visit the Ho Chi Minh Mausoleum which is located in the centre of Ba Dinh Square, which is the place where Vietminh leader Ho Chi Minh read the Declaration of Independence on September 2, 1945, establishing the Democratic Republic of Vietnam. The embalmed body of Ho Chi Minh is preserved in the cooled, central hall of the mausoleum, which is protected by a military honor guard. The body lies in a glass case with dim lights. Rules regarding dress and behavior are strictly enforced by staff and guards. Legs must be covered (no shorts or miniskirts). Visitors must be silent, and walk in two lines. Hands must not be in pockets, nor arms crossed. Smoking, drinking, eating, photography, and video taping are also not permitted anywhere inside the mausoleum. We left and went on to visit the One Pillar Pagoda and the Temple of Literature. That evening we went to a theater to see the unique performance of a Water Puppet show. The puppets are made out of wood and then lacquered. The shows are performed in a waist-deep pool. A large rod supports the puppet under the water and is used by the puppeteers, who are normally hidden behind a screen, to control them. Thus the puppets appear to be moving over the water. When the rice fields would flood, the villagers would entertain each other using this form of puppet play.

Next morning we had another cyclo ride through Hanoi's old quarter and its sprawling markets. Later we stopped to visit the infamous former prison nick-named "Hanoi Hilton". Time on our own we went back to the historic old quarter of the city for shopping and a late dinner. As Mike and I walked back to our hotel along the river we talked about our trip and commented on how nice it was. We reflected that we thought our group was very pleasant and friendly. We had a good group, met interesting people, and exchanged stories about our travels. Some of our fellow travelers had some pretty interesting stories to tell. Everyone seemed to get along and we had no serious accidents or illnesses in our group.

After our farewell dinner we were transferred to the airport for our flight to Seoul, Korea and connections for our flights back to the good old USA.

I would like to thank SmarTours and our Cambodia – Vietnam guides for a job well done. We will certainly keep them in mind for future trips....wherever they may go.

Audrey and Mike Lambert

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