

INDOCHINA

ENCOMPASSED 2017

BANGKOK TO BANGKOK

**TOUR DATES: 6 JULY – 5 AUGUST
2017**



6 July Departure from Adelaide (home) to Singapore for a quick layover and visit to the Kris Flyer Lounge for coffee and snack, 'Airline food – Blah'. So, re-board flight for an approx. 4hr flight arrive to Bangkok after roughly 20 minutes or more of circling the airport – 'round & round & round we go', we were unable to land due to quite a severe thunderstorm and rain clouds.

Not too concerned, but just made our 1st travel day loonggeerr, and not what anyone needs. Finally landed and made our way through Customs & Immigration to collect our baggage. Onward to locate the meeting point for STA/G Adventure transfer to Hotel, well that was an epic event, bit stressful being soo tired, anxious and a huge Airport.

Finally found our names and made contact with Agent, told to wait for another couple who were late due to the storm conditions, however after some time (now after midnight), we were allocated a driver to take us to the Hotel. Being in a different Country and always being on-guard, I was a bit suspect of our driver and the route he was taking us (back-streets etc.) and I made gestures and whispered to Karen to be prepared for anything untoward.

A bit concerning, we thought, but turned out to be all above board, can look back and laugh now. Arrived to Hotel and booked into room and crashed.

Final point regarding this day was that 'Never' have Karen & I experienced a Hotel room without a window, literally a boxed in room with no natural light, however made for a great dark quiet room to catch up on some much-needed sleep.

7 July Morning came upon us quicker than we hoped, however Holidays is not for rest. Get up, shower, dressed and down to see what breakfast treats await us, pleasantly surprised as there was quite a good mix of Western and Eastern selections, but in Aussie style out comes the tube of 'Vegemite'.

After breakfast went to Reception and saw the G-Adventures Notice Board and reviewed the trip notes. Noticed an in-house Activities Desk for local day-trips and sights to see in Bangkok. Decision was quickly made to employ the services of a Hotel driver and car to take us out for a day-trip to include a timely visit to the 'Maeklong Railway Market'.

This market is a traditional Thai market selling fresh vegetables, food and fruit along with some tourist aimed shops along the adjoining main street. What makes it special is that the market is located on the train line where, a few times a day, the train runs its normal schedule directly through the market. So, when the train comes, the vendors all scurry to lower their umbrella's, awnings and their produce, whether on the ground or in shelving away for the track.

Some of the vegetables that lay at a very specific height remain while the train simply rides directly right over them.

Amazingly, nothing is damaged or broken, and as soon as the train passes the vendors and customers emerge and re-form the market in a blink of the eye.

Karen was not impressed with the smells and sights of the produce and went back to the train station to wait for me. To be honest I didn't venture deep into the depths of the market either and returned to find Karen and hydrate. It was then time for photo opportunity in front of the very colorful train that was due to depart. The train driver remained in his cabin while other people stood in front, but for some unknown reason when Karen & I stood in front to be photographed he came out to the centre adjoining carriage doors and posed for us, bloody photo bomber, happy moment though.☑

Whistles blew, horns tooted and warning signals blasted and down came the boom gates and out-come the Railway Guards ready for the scheduled departure of the train. So, like all the other tourists I hurried down the track in-between the stalls to experience and video this phenomenon. Again, surprisingly as the train passed me (sooo close) the driver put his hand and High 5'd me, amazing and gave me the biggest smile.

And the markets re-appeared quicker than they disappeared, literally seconds and the Market was back in full flow, amazing.

Satisfied with this experience we decided to return to our driver to move onto the floating markets (boat ride), deciding to visit and experience the Damnoen Saduak Floating Market, as it is famous for its tourist-friendly floating markets. Damnoen Saduak is the one you'll find in the tourist literature on Thailand, so bring your camera along to witness the river packed with wooden boats overflowing with fruit and vegetables trying to sell to you as you pass.

The boat ride was a mix of canals through local homes and farming grounds, with tourist stalls around every corner. We did stop at the Coconut Sugar plantation store where we tried coconut sugar and saw how it was made. There were some huge spiders and bugs in glass frames along with the standard knick-knacks for tourists.

We also stopped off at a Temple and walked around for a short while, quite nice and also different in its own way, then made our way to wider canals where we found there were Iguana's just sunbaking on the banks, and peoples' porches leading to their homes...bazaar. I would say the tour is definitely one to experience, trying local fruits, coconut pancakes/ice-cream and the massive amount and variety of goods to buy. We finally looped/returned back to where we started to meet our driver, whom we asked if he could take us to some Handbag stores for Karen.

Well, some of the places he took us were untoward to say the least, and one in particular was like a clothing/material store, 'Say what', then the store assistant appeared and led us into a normal tiny changeroom, then opened the secret mirror/door and led us into a back room, well another travel story, classic. We tried at least three different locations, but the handbag Karen was after was just not there, so 'Home James' back to the Hotel to freshen up, change and head to the Reception Area for the official start of the Tour, meet the group and the CEO (Nak).

After the formalities were done, introducing ourselves and going over itinerary and rules etc, we all went for our very first group dinner, yes in the rain (walking). So, over to a restaurant Nak recommended for us, quaint, small and ended up being very nice meal, Chicken/Cashew Stir Fry, Pad Thai and Green Chicken Curry with beer and Coke (\$21.00).

8 July So, day 2 and off we head, walking with luggage to train station across a majorly busy central intersection, to our first stop of the trip. We then boarded our road transport, 2 mini buses and headed to enjoy a 1hr longtail boat tour of Bangkok's famous klongs (canal's). Again, saw some huge lizards (iguana's), housing, villages and stopped to handfeed some huge and very hungry catfish. Ending the tour back to the main river, we all got off the boat at what seemed to be a market style docking area and were led through a huge fresh flower market. An amazing array of fresh, colourful and different flowers never seen before. The guide was useless, just walked ahead and said 'If you see anything etc etc, just ask me a question after' "WTF".

At the end of the maze of flower stalls and walking through the market we came out to what seemed the front, main street of the Markets. We then and tried some local fruit, a Rambutan (purple hairy fruit), somewhat like a lychee in look and texture, but different and quite nice.

From there we continued to walk to Wat Po, the famous giant 46mt reclining Buddha, famous in Thai Culture, which is covered in Gold Leaf. This reclining Buddha as big as it was, is only the 7th biggest in all of Indochina. At these Temples the Thai people attend to light their candles and offer fresh flowers as blessings to Buddha.

After, a small group of us decided to make our own way back to the Hotel through and around a series of local streets and alley ways, getting lost for sure, but Sam assured us he knew where he was going. A bit odd seeing we all just arrived in a new and different Country but hey, an adventure of travel.

So, the agenda was to head back to Hotel room, shower, pack and pick up dinner from the restaurant we dined the night before to take with us to the train station for the over-night ride to Chiang Mai.

Well, travel like a local, hit the basic overnight train (sleeper) to catch up on some rest. Dinner was a letdown from the previous night, and the train ride was actually quite unique and enjoyable experience. The bedding certainly was an experience, with the Porters coming through to convert the seating into a twin overhead bunk arrangement, sort of Capsule Like, but not. Very little solid sleep was generally had.

9 July Arrived in Chiang Mai around 7.00am and made our way by bus to the Park Hotel, room 820 with very little sleep on train. The majority of the group went out on Optional Tours, Zip Lining and a Cooking Classes, but Karen, myself, Cheryl and Mel went adventure walking to explore. First stop though was a local Bakery/Café for coffee and cake etc (of course), and just walked the streets looking at shops, scenery and alike. Found a 3D museum and considered going in but didn't and Karen & I had our photo taken within the large LOVE letters at the entry. Also went into a few different shops for a nosey.

Finally, had enough and ventured back to Hotel and met on the rooftop pool for a relaxing swim and shutdown before the afternoons schedule tour of the Doi Suthep Temple. So back on the bus and drive up the hillside to a heavily populated tourist area, walked the 300 steps Naga (mythical serpent) staircase to one of northern Thailand's most sacred temples.

A very colourful and ornate staircase with a very lush and green adjacent grounds, with many photos taken along the way. Scenery, grouping, couples and locals etc.

Once to the top, entered the Temple and walked around with the local guide, again quite useless (disappointing). There were some impressive sections to the Temple, and the lookout over Chiang Mai was impressive, with a HUGE Teak structure atop the lookout, was soo impressive in its stature, fine carved detail and sheer size.

Continued to walk around the Temple to just embrace all parts, and it wasn't until we got nearly all the way around that the guide actually stopped the group near the White Elephant and commenced to divulge some history and information about the Temple, its founders and the Monks. So back down the 300 steps to the bus enjoying the scenery and people around the Temple, exciting being in this Country and looking forward to more.

Next stop was directly to the Night Markets, main aim was to head to the large Food Court for dinner, choices were not lacking, great food and great pricing. After dinner, a few went to see a Ladyboy Show and others just split up and walked the night markets doing the odd shopping here and there.

We did some, but not a lot, got lost a bit and were unable to find the nucleus of Markets, so headed home via Taxi 30Baht each. Then off to bed to relax as we still had another day in Chiang Mai before hitting the road.

10 July Up for breakfast, and chilled in Hotel while majority of group went out to Wash Elephants while Sam, Cheryl, Karen & I hit the local streets again looking for the main street, markets and sights. We finally headed in the right direction just walking local streets, talking to locals, just experiencing the city and then came upon the main central market place.

Walked and amused ourselves there for a while and then headed out towards the main streets where we found the original city walls/entrances (800yrs old) and a collapsed original mini Temple/Pagado. Hot, humid and tired we caught a Taxi back to Hotel where we as a small group decided to discuss many inconsistencies and floors with Naks' CEO style.

Went to local 7/11 to buy lunch and snacks, while we waited for group to return from Elephants to prepare ourselves for a 5-hour drive in small buses onward to Chiang Khong.

On-route we stopped to witness and walk through Wat Rong Khun (White Temple), where an unconventional Buddhist Temple was built and designed by a prominent Thai painter-turned-architect, Chalermchai, Kositpipat. The temple has a very contemporary exterior made up of mosaic mirrors where there is pop-culture and sci-fi along with some crazy sculptures of arms/hands coming from the ground (Hell). All I can say about this place is (OMG, WOW Impressive) and loved loved loved it, such an amazing impressive Temple, so not the 'Norm'.

After we did a tour of his gallery and more of the ground, I quickly darted back to buy a 'Charm' that were sold and hung in their thousands on the abhors around the grounds. This is where people write their names of lovers, friends and wishes and hang them for good luck, but I loved the Charm so much I kept it as a souvenir and brought it home to hang on our 'Memory Wall'

Well back to the bus and onward to Chiang Khong and our under impressive Hotel with concrete floors, bathroom outside, the Namkhong Guesthouse & Resort (Some Resort [not]).

I recall thinking as we walked through the lush gardens, the ornate timber structures (stairs and handrails) nice, until we reached our room, small, very basic with a concrete floor bathroom on lean-to overlooking the rear dirty lane, so ordinary.

That night headed out down the local streets for dinner to a strange style Diner, come Bar. The meal was actually quite good and we shared some shots at the bar and enjoyed a beer or two until retiring back to the room to depart in the morning after paying \$4 for breakfast.

Yes \$4 for a bread roll, jam and an egg, not really a local breakfast nor a Western style breakfast. So happy to leave and get on the bus (songthaew) for luckily only a 20-minute drive to the Boarder/Immigration to enter Laos. So \$30US later and a Visa in the passport, luggage transferred, back onto another bus to head to the Mekong River for a traditional Slow Boat ride (8hrs) down the Mekong for the remainder of the day taking in the predominately mountain side scenery and riverside villages.

It was nice to relax, settle in, mingle a bit and have lunch and drinks on board our own private Slow Boat as we drifted through the countryside of Laos. Later we arrived at our overnight stay, required to make up an overnight bag and leave remainder of luggage on Boat.

So, from the boat we walked up, and up the steep hill to our next stay, The Mekong Riverside Hotel with views overlooking the Mekong River. The rooms were actually very quaint, and were predominantly timber, adequate facilities with windows opening to an adjoining balcony, with ornate mosquito netting for the beds.

Once settled as a group we walked the main streets to a huge central market where the local people buy and sell their produce, and boy did we see some sights, especially Bat, yes full sized dried Bat. This is where I took a photo of 3 small boys sitting and playing, and then showed them the photo of themselves, and their reaction was priceless, smiles ear to ear.

Back to Hotel to shower and go out for dinner to a small local Restaurant and tried some potent local Wine/Spirit? and spicy food, was good, but not too much for our Western stomachs.

So, even after a restful day on the slow boat it was time to go back to our room, sleep and pack/prepare to leave again in the morning to continue the Mekong River cruise. However, the group of young ones 'Partied' most of the night at a local Bar and drank early on in the night.

12 July Up for breakfast to dining area across the road, typical bread roll, jam and cold eggs – so not inviting and no other choice. Wait for remainder of group especially the young ones from their late night of dancing and drinking. Then we found that Catherine lost/misplaced her purse containing CC's and money etc. not really nice feeling, and nowhere to be found.

So finally, back to our slow boat to continue our trek down the Mekong River. Shortly after we were treated to seeing some Elephants on the river bank with owner playing in the water/bathing. The long lazy day continued, again mixing with others, learning history and local traditions from our local guide etc. Then it was time for lunch, cooked and prepared by the family who owned and toured the boat for us.

Along the River we stopped off at the Pak Ou caves, one of the most respected holy sites in Lao, which have a history dating back thousands of years.

Packed with over 4,000 Buddha icons, the caves, a shrine to the river spirit and Lord Buddha, are set in a dramatic limestone cliff at the point where the Mekong joins the Nam Ou River. There are two caves to visit, the lower cave called Tham Ting and the upper cave Tham Theung, both boasting miniature Buddhist figures that are mostly made from wood.

Positioned about 50 feet above the river, Tham Ting filters in some light but a torch is required for the absolutely pitch black Tham Theung. The statues are believed to have been left in the caves by local people for hundreds of years. And during Wartimes people lived in the caves.

We walked up the step stairs into the caves overflowing with Buddha's statues of all sizes and shapes and images lining the huge Limestone walls of the cave. There was another pathway of steps/stairs up to another cave section that we struggled up consider the humidity and heat, quite an effort. The large cave atop these stairs were well worth the draining walk up and is home to the majority of the Buddha statues and you will need to find your way in darkness to the thousands of hidden icons. It was dark, and pleasantly cool inside the cave, and some rather large displays of worshipping areas, again full of peoples Buddha blessings.

After leaving the Caves we continued on to our next destination in Laos, Luang Prabang and booked into The Treasure Hotel. Shortly after we all walked to the main street area of the town and walked the very exciting, glittering and wonderfully colourful Night Market. Took a small detour up a small lane to see and experience food stalls and meats on display, and Wow, full Pigs Head and other cuts of meat we could not recognise, educational to say the least.

Returned to Hotel and majority of people took opportunity of the 2 day stay for Laundry (clean clothes) done by little local shops in streets, around \$1.50 per kilo.

13 July Up for breakfast to meet as a group to head off to a local Museum, the Ethnology Museum to learn about the dress and customs of local people and history behind it. The funniest part of the day was that as part of the History of Laos people was that was a community called 'The Karen People', interesting museum, however small but filled with history and artefacts etc.

Onward, to a local Silk Factory, the Ock Pop Tok Living Crafts Centre that is based on the banks of the Mekong River. Here you can create your own silk scarf where still to this day they are dedicated to preserving the traditional craftsmanship of silk weaving and dyeing. The centre offers guided tours where one can observe the process all the way from the silkworms to the finished product.

Here we learned from the Artisans about Laos handicrafts and the importance of woven textiles in Laos Culture. Was very interesting to learn about the different dyes and their origin/plant. Meet weavers and artisans who put their love and skill into producing the softest silk scarfs, carpets, wall hangings, and blankets, all of which you can buy on site

Indigo was the most interesting how the blues were made, and then into the huge room full of Looms where the local women were making intensely intricate materials, scarf's, materials for cushions etc and some clothing. Then around to another area to see an exhibition of sorts of old traditional tools, looms and more pertaining to the origins of their craft. Then of course the path led us to the Craft/Souvenir Shop before exiting via the common area of tables and reception desk area.

Finish the tour in the restaurant serving Lao and Western food and enjoy the view of the Mekong River and the tropical forest.

Next stop for the group was a trip to the Kuang Si (Xi) Waterfalls which are the biggest in the Luang Prabang area with three tiers leading to a 50-metre drop into spectacular azure pools before flowing downstream. The pools also make great swimming holes and are very popular with both tourists and locals, and we were able to change our clothes for swimming at the wooden huts located close to the entrance.

The pools also have cascades of up to five metres high with deliciously cold water due to the shade given by the surrounding lush tropical jungle, if you don't fancy a swim like some of the ladies didn't there are seats and shaded areas to watch others having fun jumping in and out of the water. There are trails allowing you to climb up to the top where you can see the stream feeding into the falls and enjoy some more natural pools.

Breathtaking cascades of water make the Kuang Si one of Luang Prabang's most popular tourist attractions. When you arrive at Kuang Si you'll discover cages enclosing two Asian black bears following rescue from poachers, and you can buy trinkets, t-shirts and little bears to help with donations and research. Just be careful on your walk up the tracks as they can get slippery underfoot due to the muddy surface and dew from the rainforest and water fall mist.

The weather at the waterfalls is noticeably cooler making it a really good place to escape the heat, especially towards the end of the trail where we took some couple and group photos on the bridge in front of the first major waterfall.

Cooled downed and refreshed from the wall of mist that spews up for the intense weight and pressure of the waterfall makes for a great Photo opportunity and re-charge moment.

Back to Hotel for freshen up before heading out for a local family dinner to learn about Laotian cuisine. So, as we arrive we were presented with a welcome drink in a large common room and await to be served and the food and tradition behind the food and how to eat. The mother and grandmother were so nice to us and presented each of us a bracelet and put it on us with a chant, rub and hold of our hands....

The food variety was different, but we tried everything and don't really recall there wasn't too much that we didn't really dislike, however not super fantastic, experience is what the night was about.

After Karen was not feeling too well, so we turned in and had an early night.

14 July Woke to find Karen feeling worse, not too sure what exactly, mainly upset stomach and not quite right. Tried to work out what and get some medication and fluids into her, but needed rest and for the upset stomach to pass...

Feeling guilty, I went for free time walk of town with Cheryl & Mel to visit some of the local Temples and sights. Really enjoyed the town, was a quiet, serene and pretty place, certainly a place to escape to from Rat Race, but still had everything you need to maintain parts for a comfortable Western style.

The shopping, groceries, Bakeries and Cafes were abundant, great clean, tidy and comfortable Town. Also feeling quite safe and welcoming – Liking Laos and its culture, food and people.

Stopped into a few shops, however in one shop I was torn and teased in buying a gorgeous Silver/Pewter set of Family Turtles on tray, couldn't refuse – had to buy them, and for what I thought a reasonable price.

Made our way back to Hotel and checked on Karen, still in bed recuperating, checked her fluids still up and taking some Panadol etc. So, to kill some time I went and picked up the Laundry, to unpack and put away. Was not totally dry and had a fabric conditioner smell which was not the best, but clean clothes were welcomed, except for that bloody 'Sock Muncher'. Worldwide it strikes again, I was missing a sock and we searched everywhere, no luck. I stormed back to the Laundry man and in poor translated English to Laos I left with no lost sock. Karen then sent a group msg to see if the sock turned up in others Laundry, again failed mission.

Karen still not feeling 100%, and it was time to head out for the Night Markets and some dinner. Again, feeling guilty, but headed out and met majority of group at Rooftop Bar above the Bakery. I attempted to make a small video of all us sending our best wishes to Karen and to get better soon.....

Later I hit the night market with Cheryl, Mel and a few others, loved this market as its variety, colour, atmosphere and people were energising. Soo much to buy and waste money on, hahahaha, but did fall in Love with a local artist's work, who was actually doing his art there and then, somewhat believe the Paintings were original, unlike some other's (but Dodgy).

There was 1 piece that kept calling out to me, and catching my eye, the head of an Elephant with abstract multi colours splashed as a background. The Elephants eyes kept following me and drawing me in, had to have and asked the Painting to sign and date for me as well.

The only other knick-knack items I bought was a key-ring (Bomb) believed to be made from remnants of the bombs/metal throughout the country after the War....moving.

Other's bought quite a lot and a huge variety of items were bought as well, quite eclectic actually. Apart from not sharing the shopping and market with Karen, was a very enjoyable night....So saying that, returned to Hotel room to check on Karen and settle in for the night, as we were due to move on the next morning.

15 July So, up early for breakfast to hit the road onward to our Homestay with local family in Vang Vieng. Load up onto the bus to hit the road through the mountains, windy and more windy mountain roads, and not so slow either. It was a welcome relief when we stopped for a toilet and drink break, atop the mountains at a small Rest Area with stores and pay-to-use toilets.

Yes, get back on the bus, and it didn't get any better, the ride, speed and roads became even worse, causing a lot of the group to actually start to complain and feeling travel sickness. The ride after approx. 4hrs finally came to an end where we stopped for lunch, not feeling the best, not much lunch was eaten, also considering there was more bus and road time ahead.

Tired and hoping to arrive soon, we then diverted to a more local road to head towards the village for the Homestay, well at least the main roads were smooth. The road travelled to the village made a corrugated road look smooth, so a slow, bumpy and roller coaster trip that was...painfully slow. Finally, and thankfully arrived to the small village for our homestay and waited for the families to come and select us individually for each Homestay.

After, being welcomed and shown our room for our overnight experience, daunting to say the least, we met as a group for a walking tour of the village. The weather was slightly overcast and cool so the walk was a bit of dodge and weave the puddles, and then of course the landmines (animal poo's).

As we walked through the streets/lanes it was hard to not feel as if we were imposing and intruding into their humble and struggling lives. Bit Awkward for us, and I'm sure for others as well, but we were invited into the community, and I'm sure the tourist \$\$'s help in some way. After the walk we returned to our rooms, did not shower, and no-one did I think as the facilities were very dirty and inadequate.

So, off to group dinner at the village Chiefs house for an array of different foods, rice, chicken, potatoes and vegetables – well we thought so. After we got dressed in Sarong style dresses to partake in the children's dancing and singing show on the grounds at the rear of the House.

This was so much fun, the children's innocence, smiles and happiness was contagious. They sang songs, danced traditional bamboo style dances, and then we were individually invite to dance the smacking bamboo. After, we all joined into a mass circle and danced around with the children, song after song after song. Even though the humidity and heat was overwhelming for us, it was the most enjoyable, laughable and entertaining portion of the Homestay. It was then time to gift the children with pens, pencils, books and paper for their schooling. Was like a feeding frenzy, as the children were so excited and didn't want to miss out on getting something.

Tired and beat we returned to our Homestay for sleep, not that we got much quality sleep to be honest.

16 July Up early, again no shower and back to the meeting point for standard breakfast for Indochina.

Back onto the Bus for more travel the windy and bumpy road looking forward to some bitumen. Continued onward to reach our next destination Vang Vieng to the Vilayvong Guesthouse, which ended up being quite a moment in the trip where Karen & I felt a both more accepted by the younger ones. Our double room was upstairs at the very end of the walkway, but when we opened the doors and saw the size of the room and the 180deg scenic all windows and balcony overlooking the Mekong River we were delighted.

Some free time, so off we go walking the local streets, shops and markets, but not before we found a small Café for coffee and cake (of course). Most of the group went out on Optional Activities, river rafting and scenic tours, however Karen & I didn't want to do them and stayed at Hotel and just walked around. I took the opportunity to get-away by hiring a scooter for the day and just headed out with no-plans or direction and escaped the world.

I rode the streets and found a bridge that led to the mountain sides, rice fields and to now-where, what a great day for me to re-charge and clear my head. I rode unknowingly for hours, just absorbing the country, the scenes and the people, loved it. Returned and found Karen and the girls in the Café, and offered them a ride, no takers. Later took Cheryl & Laurence for a ride just around the local streets, down to the large Market place being careful not to cause any injury or accident...

After, back to our room and some others were on their balcony sharing a beer or two and stories of their day, and Karen said they should come look at our room and balcony.

Before we knew it, majority of people came to room, drinking, chatting and laughing filling our balcony and room with memories, just great, great fun. Shortly after we all went for dinner as a group, from memory reasonable meal. Returned to Hotel for tidy, re-pack and recharge ready for morning.

17 July Breakfast in downstairs common area, again bread rolls, jam and cold eggs, soo not likin' breakfasts, even difficult to make toast and use our Vegemite. Pack up luggage, hit the bus and head to Laos' Capital Vientiane stopping on the way for lunch.

Once to our Hotel, Avalon Hotel we settled in and caught a Tuk-Tuk to Vientiane's Arc de Triomphe which is a replica of the French original, which dominates the commercial district around Th Lan Xang. Officially called the 'Victory Gate' and commemorating the Lao who died in preRevolutionary wars. It was built in the 1960s with cement donated by the USA intended for the construction of a new airport.

It makes for an interesting day with a lot to see and take in around the area, adjacent is the Presidential grounds and it looks down a formal Avenue, similar to Washington to The Palace. You can climb to the summit of the Triomphe for stunning panoramic views over Vientiane, and the courtyards large decorative fountain.

We then walked the Avenue looking at shops and alike while it rained down on us and went into small market area where we were attacked by desperate vendors wanting us to buy their goods, especially the Handbags and electronics. Finally, towards the end of the Avenue we passed the Presidents Palace, and wow it certainly was impressive. Not yet done walking, hahaha we continued around the Palace towards the main river area to look around and take in the sites, monuments and gardens etc.

Eventually we came upon a HUGE area setting up for a Night Market, again HUGE and went on forever. Karen found like a cauldron on the main road and pretended to bubble, boil & toil in it like a Witch. After we found our way out and onto a main street, we found a Café style place, went upstairs and had drinks/coffee to rest and recharge before finally heading back to Hotel.

Then no rest, straight out to Dinner, to a Restaurant just around the corner, and on the corner of the main street intersection opposite a Huge Government Building that's was coincidentally holding a special dignitary Black&White Dinner night. Was an enjoyable dinner, slightly Western flavours?

18 July Awake, breakfast and a free morning for us, so Karen & I decided to do our own thing and headed off, hired a Tuk Tuk to experience the Golden/Gilded Temple.

The Pha That Luang is considered the most important temple in Laos and also referred to as The Golden Temple of Vientiane. This Buddhist stupa is not only a major touristic attraction but also a national symbol for the Lao people.

On the temple grounds of Pha That Luang you'll find locals praying to the several Buddhist shrines or bringing offerings to the statue of King Setthathirat placed in front of the temple. We saw a lady purchase a small bamboo cage full of tiny birds (finch's) and set them free in a blessing/offering – to bring good luck into your life. Also, in these grounds was another quite large reclining Buddha, very impressive.

The Golden Luang Stupa is an amazing sight and from close by you can see how much work has gone in the construction of this temple.

On the same sacred grounds there is the That Luang Nuea temple which is a lot smaller but beautiful as well. For souvenir shoppers, head to the small market outside the temple grounds, it's quite interesting because you'll find all kinds of offering gifts as well.

We then returned to the Hotel to prepare for a short Flight from Laos to the bustling Capital of Vietnam-Hanoi (1hr) and arrived to our next stay, the Church Boutique Hotel. This Hotel was in a very tiny street, as they all were, plus the Hotel was literally only approx. 3-4mts wide, but 11 stories high.

Once we found our rooms and put luggage away it was time to head out for a walk and tour. So, off we head toward the Old Quarter section and Lake. Well, to be honest Karen & I thought the traffic was crazy in China, but I think Vietnam wins, the amount of mayhem, scooters, lack of footpath to walk on and energy was breathtaking.

After we headed to a popular tourist & local eat street area for a traditional Vietnamese meal. A vibrant, heavily patronised and bustling street – which was a relief once we arrived to where we were to dine. What happened then can only be described as Monotonous Mayhem – funny shit. We sat outside in the lane at tiny tables and chairs, you know the colourful plastic chairs you see in Childcare Centres, and to top it off we were told this was Illegal and if we see the Police to move and take everything very very quickly as the Restaurant gets 'Fined'.

So, we ordered our respective meals which consisted of the raw food and produce, a little gas cooker and hot plate etc, so off we go, cook our own meal, not knowing really what we were doing, 'travel fun & experience'.

So, we were not even half-way through our dinner, and Murphy's Law wins again, scurry, hurry, bustle, noise and things go flying everywhere literally, our food, table, chairs get ripped right from under us and we were left standing with food still in our hands as we look up and see the street vacate within seconds and then two Police Officers walking/Strolling down the lane.

Standing there stunned, food in hands and laughing at the moment that is literally taking shape in front of our very eyes, hilarious, but somewhat daunting. Then we were shuffled inside, upstairs to a small area within the building to continue our meals, which by the way was so dissected, no-one got back their exact meal back, and we were all still in shock of what actually happened – still laughing at the reality.

After we finally finished dinner, we headed back to Hotel for rest and sleep, but some of the younger ones stayed out enjoying the atmosphere and partook in some drinking.....

19 July So up for breakfast down to the ground floor, alley like tables and general walkway, tight. Then as a group off for a not so long walk to visit Ho Chi Minh Mausoleum. The humidity level was high and the walk was not so short and seemed so long and tiring in the humidity took its toll, especially when Nak just walked on away from the group not considering the age gaps and health of some, very inconsiderate (rude).

Ho Chi Minh Mausoleum in Ba Dinh Square is one of the most visited attractions in Hanoi. It is the final resting place of Ho Chi Minh, the most iconic and popular leader of Vietnam, known to his people as 'Uncle Ho', where his body is preserved here in a glass case (albeit against his wishes).

Started in 1973, the construction of the mausoleum was modelled on Lenin's mausoleum in Russia and was first open to the public in 1975. The granite building meant a great deal for many locals as it ensures that their beloved leader 'lives on forever'.

Continued to walk to the entrance where we had to line up in long queues, trying to keep hydrated, then we were required to forfeit our camera's, bags and water, ridiculous in the humidity (not impressed). Then like sheep (typical of holidays) we waiting in line to make our way into the Mausoleum which was heavily guarded at every corner by Uniformed Soldiers (pristine white uniforms).

So, rules and more rules upon entering - no sunglasses, no talking, no cameras, no food or liquids and move quickly. And the rules were adhered to the letter as we were shuffled very quickly inside, around Ho Chi Minh's glass encased body and then back out, like done in a flash – very impersonal and lacked a tourist moment to remember.

After existing and returning to the entry point to collect our belongings, Nak decides to tell us we have to find our own way back to the Hotel, walk or Taxi – WTF, some CEO and Tour. Shocked and slightly angry, we had no choice and piled into shared Taxi's and returned to Hotel.

The day didn't really get much better, as later we all as a group walked back to the crazy intersection/Lake area to go to a traditional Water Puppet Show. Not knowing what to expect, we entered with an open mind and expectation, tradition and history though were not our friends. It was hard to understand the storylines and was not really engaging, only if we were given an introduction etc, maybe we could have enjoyed it a bit more.

It was a consensus of most of the group as well. After leaving the Puppet Show we walked to see the sites of a Market, again slight letdown, day not going so well....

Back to Hotel to re-fresh etc before heading out on a guided Street Food Tour with Annie. We separated into smaller groups for ease, so we were in for 9 different taste experiences of Vietnam, from pancakes to egg coffee to others I can't recall. After Karen & I went to meet up with George & Annie to help celebrate his 21st Birthday at a Pub. It was great timing as they were due to leave the tour and head back to England, so a farewell night as well.

20 July Up early to leave the Hotel, board for a Bus drive to Halong Bay to experience an overnight stay on a Junk Boat. Arrive Bai Chay harbour, the starting point for Halong Bay tour.

Sprawling Halong City (also known as Bai Chay) is the bay's main gateway, but its high-rises are a disappointing doorstep to this site. The unique beauty of the bay with its karsts make it a natural to be added to UNESCO's World heritage listing. But, it seems the opinions are divided among travellers. There are more than 1,600 islets in the bay, their limestone worn down by 500 million years of tropical downpours and topped by thick jungle growth.

Some of the islands are hollow, creating majestic caves. Some of the larger islands have their own lakes. At the centre of the bay there are 775 of the formations in an area of just 330 square kilometres – an invitation for travellers to board a traditional Vietnamese junk-boat and explore the bay, it's islands, caves, and floating villages.

Upon arriving, amongst the many groups of tourists and many many junk boats we made our way to board our own privately guided boat.

Being shown to our respective rooms and then meet for safety instructions, life vests and evacuation procedures we all settled in and spread ourselves around the boat to take in the departure from the Marina.

Heading out to open waters we mingled and took in the approaching islets and limestone cliff sides of the Bay. Heading out of the Bay for an overnight stay we later settled in for a 9-course lunch (small servings) which was quite nice with a good variety of foods.

Later in the day we moored inside a large Islet area to do some day activities, where I joined in for a Kayak experience paddling in and around the cliff faces and through an opening into a secluded and protected area. We then returned to the landing and back to the Junk Boat we all the group went for a guided tour of the Ti Top Beach & Mountain (400 steps) to the lookout. Ti Top Island is regarded as one of the most attractive sites for both international and domestic tourists to Halong. The name Ti Top is named by the most respectful hero of Vietnam, President Ho Chi Minh, after the Russian astronaut German Titop on the occasion of his first visit to Halong Bay in 1962.

After climbing the stairs to the lookout, resting, hydrating and taking the obligatory photos of the bay etc, I descended back down to the rest of the group who taken advantage of the relief of the heat by swimming in the beach.

After cooling down and relaxing it was time to head back to the Junk Boat to shower, change and settle in for dinner.

Another 9-course dinner with reasonable variety of foods to finishing off the day of exercise. The night began to get wild and windy with rain, thunder & lightening so most of the group started a very bad vocal Karaoke Night. Karen stayed up for a while but I retired.

21 July Up for quick breakfast and headed off to the Sung Sot Grotto (caves) situated in the centre of the UNESCO World Heritage area, Sung Sot or "Surprise Cave" is on Bo Hon Island, and is one of the most spectacular and largest grottoes of Halong Bay. The mouth of the grotto is reached by ascending about a hundred stone steps. One is surrounded by trees and foliage on the journey up as the shimmering bay below offers an ever more panoramic vista to admire.

The caves were truly magnificent in size and are partitioned into two chambers; the first being similar to a wide theatre hall, with many stalactites hanging from the high ceiling. A narrow passage leads to the second chamber, where a flow of natural light bathes the surfaces. The light is filtering in from above, through a large opening creating a natural skylight, this opening also serves as the exit from the grotto. The chamber is so immense it could contain thousands of people at one time.

At the deepest point of this chamber a "royal garden" appears with a clear pond and a fascinating landscape of small mountains. Many birds and plants (benjamin figs, cycads and centenary banyan trees) can be seen here. On some days groups of monkeys straying in from the dense vegetation of the island might appear, in search of fruit. The grotto covers some 10,000 m². There are thousands of stalactites and stalagmites along the 500-meter paved passage. Light posts line the passage and illuminate the amazing scenery.

Spotlights of varied colours are placed in such a way to be unobtrusive and add to the enchantment of the grotto.

The 30-meter high roof of the grotto, the walls and innumerable cracks and crevices are evidence of millions of years of spectacular natural creation. Close to the exit a mammoth formation stretches from floor to ceiling, tapering at the centre to form a concave pillar that appears to be keeping the ceiling in place. Walking through the cave ones' imagination can run wild conjuring up all kinds of fantastic creatures and fanciful creations.

After returned to boat for large lunch and ailed back to Marina to finish the tour, and board the bus to drive onward towards Hanoi. Had some free time, so we decided to go for our own un-guided walk to sniff out the Electronics Street to find a camera for Cheryl. Well what an experience, waste of time and curious adventure this turned out to be. I got us lost which is not the norm, however as tradition goes getting lost heightens the adventure.

We found no camera electronic shops, mainly large whitegoods, let down plus, then we made our way through a central open square where festivities were being set up for and some small market stalls. Tired, hot and frustrated we navigated our way back to the Hotel, finally finding a landmark (the Lake).

The days hilarities didn't finish there either, the entire group of 18-20 people had to use 1 tiny day room to shower and change (tag style) and with any towels as the Hotel had none, so there were some flannels being shared between people, hilarious (not).

Onward, we made our way to our next adventure, another overnight train to head to Hue.

The trains accommodation style was lower grade than our previous one, and we were corralled to 4 persons a cabin, bunk style for a 12hr washing machine style ride and sleep.

22 July Arrive early to Hue, once the Imperial Capital of Vietnam and after checking in, straight out to commence tours. First tour was to the Tien Mu Pagoda, which is located at the end of Kim Long Road, in Huong Long Ward, on the northern bank of the Perfume River.

There are many legends about Thien Mu Pagoda (also known as Linh Mu Pagoda). Once upon a time, local residents saw an old lady in red appear every night on top of the hill. She foretold that: one day, the Lord would pass by and build something of great importance. From then on, the hill was named Thien Mu Son (Mountain of Lady from Heaven).

When Lord Nguyen Hoang actually went pass the hill, he heard the legend and decided to build a pagoda and named it Thien Mu. Having gone through a lot of eventful phase, damages as well as renovations, today the pagoda still exists and remains the unofficial symbol of the ancient city Hue.

A building near the rear of the complex houses a national relic: the car which carried the monk Thich Quang Duc to the intersection of Phan Dinh Phung and Le Van Duyet streets in Saigon on June 11th 1963, where he burned himself to death in opposition to the anti-religion policy of Saigon's regime at that time. Struggling with the heat and high humidity we all continued on to then visit the Imperial Citadel, famously being one of Vietnam's seven UNESCO World Heritage Sites.

The Imperial City of Hue was actually a walled fortress and palace belonged to the ancient city of Hue which was a capital city of the Nguyen Dynasty for 140 years date back from 1805 until 1945.

The grandeur architecture was planned to be built in 1803 by Gia Long – an emperor who founded the Nguyen Dynasty. During 27 years from 1805 to 1832, the Imperial City of Hue was finally completed under the reign of Minh Mang, making it the most massive structure being built in the history of modern Vietnam involving thousands of workers, millions cubic meters of rock and huge volume of burden workload. It locates on the northern bank of Huong River, turning South with total land area of 520 ha. The place was made UNESCO Site in 1993 with the remained buildings being actively restored and preserved after the destruction from the Vietnam War.

The Imperial City of Hue has a circumference of 10 kilometres with the height of 6.6 meters and 21 meters thick with forts being meanderingly arranged, accompanied by cannons, artilleries and ammunitions. Initially the fortress was built solely by soil, only to be replaced by bricks afterward. Surrounding the city is the complicated canal system served not only as a protection but also as a waterway with nearly seven kilometres.

Tired, dehydrated and weary I continued on with a small few as other returned to the Hotel for a swim and relax.

So the committed (haha) wearily continued onward to the Royal Tombs, which are Southeast of the Citadel, on both banks of the Perfume River, are seven royal tombs. Monuments to the rulers of the Nguyen dynasty, including Minh Mang, Khai Dinh, and Tu Doc, the tombs are all definitely worth a visit.

Each one is built in the traditional Vietnamese style of geomancy, even modifying the surrounding landscape to ensure straight lines, certain directional orientation, and other elements designed to comply with supernatural forces.

At the tombs, we were treated to courtyards filled with stone elephants, horses, and mandarins. There were also some pavilions, temples for worshiping the emperor's soul, and eulogies.

I couldn't help myself thinking on how similar these warriors resembled the Terracotta Warriors of Xi'an. Most of the tombs were planned by the emperor himself, so each royal tomb reflects the personality of the deceased ruler. Emperor Minh Mang's tomb, for example, reflects his strict adherence to Confucianism through its Chinese style, its formality, and its clean, symmetrical lines.

Some of the group went on an optional motorcycle tour of the rice paddy fields and hillside to witness local farmers while we took the time out to re-charge and relax.

23 July Up for breakfast, and a free day so Karen, myself & Cheryl decided to self-walk and tour the streets, river and markets ourselves. Walking the main street heading for the cross-over bridge we were lured to take a family's small dragon boat across the river to the Markets. Good idea we thought, HA, the whole trip the lady pressured us into wanting to buy all of her items (souvenirs), polite but NO....

Left the dragon boat with a grumpy lady, and made our way through the back end, smelly part of the markets out to the stalls area. Not too much to see, really local market for fish and vegetables for locals.

Finally made our way out to the main street and found more general market area, but alas again average, so we just walked back over the bridge, through the beautiful Parklands to the Hotel. Karen and I had some photos with the Artwork and Statues in the Park.

Once settled back to Hotel, hitch em' up and go, so on the bus for a trip to head to Hoi an up the hillsides and through the Hoi Van Pass. Once there, unfortunately the weather was not our friend, low cloud and misty conditions hampered the view of the Monuments and the Bay of Danang.

The Hải Vân Pass ("ocean cloud pass"), is an approximately 21 km long mountain pass on National Route 1A in Vietnam. It traverses a spur of the larger Annamite Range that juts into the East Sea of Viet Nam, on the border of Đà Nẵng and Thừa Thiên–Huế Province, near Bạch Mã National Park. Its name refers to the mists that rise from the sea, reducing visibility. Historically, the pass was a physical division between the kingdoms of Champa and Đại Việt.

The twisting road on the pass has long been a challenge for drivers traveling between the cities of Huế and Đà Nẵng. Since the completion of Hải Vân Tunnel, traffic flow and safety have improved.

Later that afternoon we finally arrived to our Hotel in Hoi An, the Vinh Hung 2 Resort for the next 3 days. First things first was to get some urgent laundry done by the ladies out the front of the Hotel, take ur' pick.

24 July The day started out with rain, wind and poor, so out-come the umbrella's and jackets, but that didn't stop us on heading out in the morning after breakfast.

We headed into the Hoi An Ancient Town, located on the banks of the poetic Thu Bon River, in central Quang Nam province.

Hoi An ancient town is an Eastern oriental classic captivation. With the strategic location on the banks of the great river, with one seaside border (East), it used to be one of the major trading centres in Southeast Asia during the 16th century due to the early western trader occupying period.

After we retired back to the Hotel for the night, where I started to feel burnt out, thinking a was getting sick and need sleep. However, it turned out to be 2 ½ days of bed rest, due to continually go, go, go it took its toll.

25 July So, still in bed fatigued it was Karen's turn to head out without me and explore and continue the holiday experiencing the sights and views of where we were. Did not bother me at all, due to my severe lack of energy levels.

In saying that, I don't think Karen overly took much from Hoi An due to the sultry and wet weather, but made the most of it. I tried to recover, not to miss out on anything, but 'Not going to Happen'. Karen had Bahn Mi roll for dinner.

26 July Free Day, and again Karen took time out to head out with group and then separately with Cheryl & Mel. I was no better, not gaining energy but wanted soo much to get back out there for a few important reasons.

It was later in the day, actually heading into dusk that I gathered my strength and headed out with the group to experience lighting blessing candles on the river with Karen at night-time is the Japanese covered bridge – Chua Cau which is situated in the heart of the old Japanese town on Tran Phu street.

So, after 6 o'clock in the evening, as the old town lightened, it's the time for paper lanterns with small candles inside twinkle. Strolling along the bank of the Hoai river at night in the area between the Japanese covered bridge and the An Hoi bridge, you can easily see the little lovely girls in ao dai – Vietnamese traditional dress wearing conical hat and holding flat winnowing basket full of paper lanterns. This is where we bought our paper lanterns, sucked in by cute little girl and sweet old lady. Once we lit them you put them down on the river then make a wish. This is considered to bring you good luck and happiness.

After we walked cross the bridge and were pleasantly surprised to venture into a rather large night market, on the other side of the Hoai river is An Hoi island. This area focuses on restaurants, bars and roadside shops and is where you can come to enjoy Hoi An cuisine, drink beers or get some handmade souvenirs for your friends and relatives at the night market on Nguyen Hoang street: jewellery, bags, bracelets, necklaces, lanterns,...There are also lots of pictures about Hoi An and the other nearby areas sold on this island.

So, after all the festivities and shopping done, Karen, Mel, Cheryl & I walked back to our Hotel to rest, shower, re-pack and get ready for our next move, onward to Ho Chi Ming City (Saigon). Again Bahn Mi's were had for dinner.

27 July Awake, breakfast and final re-pack, board our bus and head back towards Da Nang to catch our short flight. After we check in our luggage and start to stand in line for boarding I realise everyone's worst travel fear, lost my mobile phone. Highly stressed, check everywhere, every pocket and bag 3 times over.

Quickly advised Nak, as I was 110% positive it must have fallen out of my pants pocket on the bus we just got off. Nak quickly called the driver to stop, check the front of the bus, but he said 'No, nothing there'.

I was soo sure and I was just using it to check something etc and told Nak to tell the driver to look properly in and around the seats, not just on the seat. Nak actually admitted the driver would have not looked properly and told him quite sternly to look again and look properly, and YES it was there, so Nak left the Airport to meet the driver and retrieve my mobile. Drama evaded and stress levels lowered.

Flew to Ho Chi Ming city and booked into the Hong Hac Boutique Hotel. 1st stop of the days tours was at The War Remnants Museum, where US armoured vehicles, artillery pieces, bombs and infantry weapons are on display outside. One corner of the grounds is devoted to the notorious French and South Vietnamese prisons on Phu Quoc and Con Son Islands. Artefacts include that most iconic of French appliances, the guillotine, and the notoriously inhumane 'tiger cages' used to house war prisoners.

The ground floor of the museum is devoted to a collection of posters and photographs showing support for the antiwar movement internationally. This somewhat upbeat display provides a counterbalance to the horrors upstairs.

Even those who supported the war are likely to be horrified by the photos of children affected by US bombing and napalming. You'll also have the rare chance to see some of the experimental weapons used in the war, which were at one time military secrets, such as the *flechette*, an artillery shell filled with thousands of tiny darts.

The Museum was really quite sad, however understand the reasons why, to remember and why War should NEVER be Repeated.

From here the group were treated to a 'Cyclo Tour', our transport today, a three wheeled bicycle with a carriage at the front for us to sit in, while the driver uses pedal power to power us along. This allows us to take in the sights, sounds and smells of Ho Chi Minh City without the barrier of a car window or the sound of an engine, very environmentally friendly.

However, not so perfect when the weather is rainy, but only towards the end of the tour. First stop was to the Presidential palace, which is now a Museum. We stopped and looked around but did not enter the grounds and remained at the entrance/gate area.

Back into Cyclo's to see Saigon's Notre Dame Cathedral, built in the late 1880s by French colonists, is one of the few remaining strongholds of Catholicism in the largely Buddhist Vietnam. Located in Paris Square, the name Notre Dame was given after the installation of the statue 'Peaceful Notre Dame' in 1959. In 1962, the Vatican conferred the Cathedral status as a basilica and gave it the official name of Saigon Notre-Dame Cathedral Basilica. Measuring almost 60 metres in height, the cathedral's distinctive neo-Romanesque features include the all-red brick façade (which were imported from Marseille), stained glass windows, two bell towers containing six bronze bells that still ring to this day, and a peaceful garden setting in the middle of downtown Ho Chi Minh City District 1.

After we took the obligatory photos, we headed across the road to the adjacent Central Post Office which is a beautifully preserved remnant of French colonial times and perhaps the grandest post office in all of Southeast Asia.

The building was designed by Alfred Foulhoux and features arched windows and wooden shutters, just as it would have in its heyday in the late 19th Century, featuring, looping arches, intricately designed marble floors and antiquated telephone boxes all serve as a reminder of the importance the post office played in days before email and mobile phones.

That was when the weather turned on us, and on came the wet weather gear and covers on the Cyclo's. But onward we strived to the Monument built to honor the Monk who, on June 11, 1963, Thích Quảng Đức, surrounded by a circle of protesters, burned himself to death. He described his intentions in a final note: "I respectfully plead to President Ngô Đình Diệm to take a mind of compassion towards the people of the nation and implement religious equality to maintain the strength of the homeland eternally."

In 2010 this memorial, displaying the monk wreathed in flames, was installed on the very corner where he died a half century before (now Nguyễn Đình Chiểu and Cach Mạng Thang Tam streets).

After we headed back to our Hotel, where at the very last corner Karen had a collision between her Cyclo and a Motorbike, very scary actually and apart from initially being shaken up, Karen did actually get hurt with large bruising on the inside of her left bicep area.

After the accident and taking time to ice Karen's arm, we headed out to a food market for dinner, and then I decided to head out with Sam and a few others to a Micro-Brewery Bar. Not feeling 100% and not really enjoying the beer (humidity) I decided to walk home in the rain, getting lost (twice). Finally made my way back to Hotel to find Karen & Cheryl sitting of steps of Hotel.

28 July Today was another adventure day where we headed out for a myriad of tour sites, 1st being the Cu Chi Tunnels, which is now part of a massive war museum, where they offer visitors a sneak-peek at the underground life of Vietnamese soldiers back in 1948. The site has over 120km of underground tunnels, with trapdoors, living areas, kitchens, storage facilities, armoury, hospitals, and command centres.

After the war against the French, Vietnamese soldiers expanded the tunnels and included effective air filtration systems, which helped them survive the Chu Chi carpet-bombings. There is also a shooting range where I paid VND 35,000 per bullet to shoot an M16 Assault Rifle. I actually hit the target as well.

During the tour Karen & I had a go at entering the tiny camouflaged ground trap-door, however only Karen actually walked through the tight, dark and long tunnel, I stayed out of course (Claustrophobic).

After we headed to the Ben Thanh Market for me to buy some headphones, but I upset the seller and didn't end up buying any. We then went to head for dinner for Catherine's Farewell from the group as her part was over.

29 July Breakfast, and after a 2hr bus ride we went out for a boat cruise through the villages, islands and markets of the Mekong delta, and various site visits while touring (Unicorn Island). 1st stop was to a fruit tasting in a small village where we were shown the traditional Chinese shoulder baskets for carrying produce. While we sat and tried the different local fruits we were entertained by a small group of musicians and singing. After that we then toured inside a local house and echo art was explained to us on how normal life is and was traditionally done.

We then walked through the village to see the animals, farming tools intrinsically linked to their lifestyle.

After we continued on along the local streets and roads to witness and taste Bee's and their natural Honey. Karen stayed away due to her allergic reactions to Bee stings, but I tried the raw honey directly from the bee's honeycomb, then we sat down for honey tea and biscuits/nibbles.

Then it was onto the boat for a short ride to Coconut Island to experience our next few daily treats. Coconut Island is infamous for its candy made from fresh coconut. Unfortunately, the rain continued and made the day wet underfoot, but we strived on, holiday adrenalin.

Coconut candy, called Keo dua by the Vietnamese, is one of the most popular and delicious candies in Vietnam enjoyed by a majority of people because of its unique and fragrant taste. Perhaps, in order to enjoy a truly taste of coconut candy, regions of Mekong Delta is the best place producing best coconut candy and Ben Tre Province.

Ben Tre is known as the coconut island where you can be familiar with a great number of coconut palm trees. Therefore, besides being a favourite drink offering sweet and refreshable, local people take advantage of coconut flesh to make such a great candy. For those who are interested in exploring the culture of local people, adopt a visit to famous workshops to gain first-hand experience of how people manufacture those sweet and tasty candies. Especially, it would be a great idea to buy them as souvenirs for your families and friends.

While we were there, on site was a man displaying his huge Python (Yellow/White) offering us tourists to place around our neck for photo's.

I have never really touched or held a snake, let alone a huge python, but 'When in Rome' I did, and did it 3 times. Even Karen gathered the courage to do it as well, with a lot of fear and reservations, scared and shaking she let the snake be put around her neck, but not for long.....

The next part of our day was sooo much fun as we were shown to our mode of transport, a Jeep/Tractor style of Tuk Tuk to be piled in the back and driven around the tiny lanes thorough the village towards the river. Ducking branches and leaves and laughing at each other on separate Tuk Tuk's was hilarious.

So, we line up in a little back lane on uneven concrete pavers/steps as we 4 by 4 line up to board our river canoe/boat ride through the mangroves to get back to the boat. Once back on the boat we moored again, landing to have lunch which was quite an interesting lunch as the menu was diverse respecting the natural culture.

After lunch was over we headed back to mainland to finish up for the day, back to Hotel to freshen up, re-pack to get ready to move on to Cambodia the next morning. Later that evening we walked to the Markets for a look around, obligatory ice-cream.

30 July Breakfast, pack luggage into bus to head to the Border for crossing from Vietnam into Cambodia. We arrived to the Border where we all got off the bus, and the bus kept on driving (with our luggage) through, to meet us on the other side. We walked in as a group and had our passports and visas checked and verified. Then went to the bus and wait for all to pass through Customs.

After we headed into Cambodia and stopped shortly after at a local cafeteria/shop for lunch. Well, not so impressed with local food in Cambodia at this stage. Low class meat, vegetables and bread etc, hardly ate anything, and were more interested in the local lady at front of shop selling deep fried tarantula's, live scorpions and many other unknown bugs/insects.

Back on the bus, and head into the Capital, Phnom Penh to our accommodation, the Diamond Hotel. After checking in and settling in, off we go on a Cyclo Tour of the city starting from Wat Phnom.

Cyclos (pronounced see-cloe) are an integral part of the Phnom Penh landscape. These iconic vehicles, first introduced in 1936, remain one of the best and most economical ways to see the city. Cyclo drivers, however, are among the poorest of the urban poor in Cambodia. The Cyclo Centre is a local NGO providing basic support and social services to the drivers. The exact number of cyclo drivers in Phnom Penh is not known because of the transient nature of the work, but we have nearly 1,400 registered members.

Our tour took us past many different areas of the city, in particular, Post Office, Central Round-a-bout, Van's Restaurant, Royal Palace, National Museum taking in the breathtaking stunning colonial buildings and architecture. We stopped off at the round-a-bout for a local guide to inform us of history and information pertaining to the City and the Monuments. After we rode along the riverside and the cafes that line the streets.

After the cyclo tour we walked along the river boulevard taking in the sights of Phnom Penh, the buildings, people and places to eat, shop and experience.

Karen, myself and Nak shared a meal experience upstairs at a local restaurant overlooking the river. Wow, what a great meal, both Karen & I so enjoyed our meals considering the past 23 days along with a cold beer – a very casual night.

31 July Up for breakfast, which was only slightly better than many previous meals, then to get on-board for a huge day's outings.

First stop of the day was an emotional and soul-searching visit to the Killing Fields of Choeung Ek. Between 1975 and 1978 about 17,000 men, women, children and infants who had been detained and tortured at S-21 were transported to the extermination camp. It is a very peaceful place (sign of respect), where visitors learn of the horrors that unfolded here decades ago.

The remains of 8985 people, many of whom were bound and blindfolded, were exhumed in 1980 from mass graves in this one-time longan orchard; 43 of the 129 communal graves here have been left untouched. Fragments of human bone and bits of cloth are scattered around the disinterred pits. More than 8000 skulls, arranged by sex and age, are visible behind the clear glass panels of the Memorial Stupa, which was erected in 1988.

The audio tour includes stories by those who survived the Khmer Rouge, plus a chilling account by Him Huy, a Choeung Ek guard and executioner, about some of the techniques they used to kill innocent and defenceless prisoners, including women and children. There's also a museum here with some interesting information on the Khmer Rouge leadership and the ongoing trial.

This tour was so devastating to the belief of what humans can do to other humans, barbaric, horrific and unimaginable.

It actually took its toll on our emotions and compassion for the victims, and utter disgust for the Khmer Rouge.

The day was not going to get any better soon either, as our next stop was to the Genocide Museum, where in 1975, Tuol Svay Prey High School was taken over by Pol Pot's security forces and turned into a prison known as Security Prison 21 (S-21); it soon became the largest centre of detention and torture in the country. S-21 has been turned into the Tuol Sleng museum, which serves as a testament to the crimes of the Khmer Rouge.

Between 1975 and 1978 more than 17,000 people held at S-21 were taken to the killing fields of Choeung Ek. Like the Nazis, the Khmer Rouge leaders were meticulous in keeping records of their barbarism. Each prisoner who passed through S-21 was photographed, sometimes before and after torture. The museum displays include room after room of harrowing B&W photographs; virtually all of the men, women and children pictured were later killed. You can tell which year a picture was taken by the style of number-board that appears on the prisoner's chest. Several foreigners from Australia, New Zealand and the USA were also held at S-21 before being murdered.

Karen & I actually stopped entering the buildings to listen to the guides stories, and looking at the photos, conditions and artefacts.

Later we returned to our Hotel and were opted to have free time or visit other places. Karen & I opted to have some free time and hit the local streets and markets to experience the local feel. We walked the fruit and vegetable markets, and the main huge under cover markets.

We made our way to 1 of the 8 markets, the Central Market, which is housed in a beautiful Art-Deco building, is the most spacious and cleanest market in Phnom Penh. Central market has the biggest supply of jewellery and gemstones of all markets and probably the freshest food section. You can also find a lot of shops selling electronics and household electronics around the market.

After as a group we all made our way to a huge Phnom Penh Night market to see and experience the outdoor eateries and food stalls, where we saw and caught up with Catherine and her friend. This market is relatively small and is only open Friday to Sunday from 6pm until midnight, but it is a nice and airy market located on riverside close to the restaurants and the nightlife. The night market is aimed towards tourist and offers mostly touristic stuff.

When you are shopping at the markets there is a few things you should keep in mind; none of the markets are indoors with air-conditioning so drink a lot of water and bring a small wet towel that you can keep around your neck to cool off and dry off your sweat with.

So off to dinner, back upstairs where we ate the night before, to share with the group. Karen & my expectations were high from the previous night, but somewhat we were let down, yes a nice dinner, but not soo impressive as last night.

After we walked the night-life of the activities happening along the river promenade, and watched Nak eat a fresh serving of Belut, the embryo duck in egg shell, soo disgusting.

1 Aug Up for breakfast to prepare for a long day of driving, bus ride to Siem Reap to visit Angkor Wat Temples.

This was a long drive, approx. 6hrs through the beautiful Cambodian countryside taking in the scenery and sites of locals going about their daily activities. Some sites were amazingly eye opening, such as the transport of barrels, timber, doors and whatever mainly piled on scooters, and then trucks, so overladen, crazy.

En-route we stopped off at *Skuon Spider Town* which is 55km north of Phnom Penh which is famous for where they hunt and eat spiders... or rather tarantulas. The unusual eating habits of the residents of Skuon are earning the town a growing reputation, as both visitors to Cambodia and locals alike stop here to sample these tasty snacks. These spiders were in fact first eaten during the brutal reign of the Khmer Rouge when food was scarce and starvation rife. In Skuon they were most commonly found, but the custom has continued until the present day. Furthermore, hawkers hailing from Skuon now visit villages nearby and Phnom Penh to sell their goods.

As for the spiders themselves, they are big, black and hairy, we won't beat around the bush. But they are surprisingly delicious! They live under the earth and hunters will tempt them with bait before catching them. After an average catch of around 200 or so, they are sold to vendors who deep fry them before donning their hawker gear and taking loaded trays to tempt customers. The animals have been used in traditional medicine for many years and are believed to be good for the heart and lungs. The legs and head will be eaten first, devouring the large abdomen is one's personal choice. Many locals claim it's the best bit, others will turn their nose up. Children seem to enjoy these snacks the most, so there's no excuse for you not to give it a go! And the taste? Certainly NOT like chicken...

To engulf the full degustation experience, I not only ate the tarantula, but indulged in a scorpion, cricket, grasshopper and meal-worm. All of the bugs were deep fried and really were just a crunchy meal, not real taste, except the tarantula was actually the best tasting bug as it was deep fried in a garlic oil.

After the stop to allow me to indulge in this experience, obligatory toilet stop, we continued on the bus ride towards Siem Reap.

Later that day, finally arrived at the Nagara Angkor Boutique Hotel and checked into our rooms. Later that night we just walked the local area taking in the city and local streets and had dinner at a well-known Pho Restaurant.

Well, off to bed for an early night, up at the crack of dawn, 4.00am start to head to Angkor Wat for a sunrise setting.

2 Aug Wake up, dreary eyed and sleepy, onto the bus and head in the dark to Angkor Wat, to stand in line with all and sundry to get in position in front of the main Temple (Angkor Wat) for a spectacular sunrise in front of the lake, for that perfect 'Postcard' reflection photo.

So, after getting the tickets the bus drops us off, so we can walk ages to enter from the rear of the Temple, why I don't know as when we finally got to the Lake & Temple we were still among hundreds of tourists all there for the same reason.

So, there I was wanting poll position, 'Ha' far too late for that, however took opportunities as they arose, and finally made my way to the edge of the Lake. Waiting with anticipation for the Sun to Rise, wanting that perfect shot, colour and reflection. Time was having its way with everyone's patience, but finally sunrise was upon us, cameras lens poised and shutter mania.

Selfies, portraits and landscape photos taken in their 1,000's within a matter of 10-20 minutes before daylight ate up the dawn. Then it was time for breakfast at the trestles/tables brought with us from the Hotel.....

Then it was time to walk, experience and absorb the Temples for a very very long humid, wet and amazing moment.

First Temple was the awe inspiring and impressive Angkor Wat, then, North gate of Bantey kdey, Ta Phrum and Bayon.

Angkor Wat and Bayon were easily my most favorite Temples visited, however this takes nothing away for the others visited, South gate of Bayon, North gate of Bayon, Preh Khan and Neak Pean.

Angkor Wat – built by Suryavarman II (r 1112–52) – is the earthly representation of Mt Meru, the Mt Olympus of the Hindu faith and the abode of ancient gods. The Cambodian god-kings of old each strove to better their ancestors' structures in size, scale and symmetry, culminating in what is believed to be the world's largest religious building.

The temple is the heart and soul of Cambodia and a source of fierce national pride. Unlike the other Angkor monuments, it was never abandoned to the elements and has been in virtually continuous use since it was built.

At the heart of Angkor Thom is the 12th-century Bayon, the mesmerising, if slightly mind-bending, state temple of Jayavarman VII. It epitomises the creative genius and inflated ego of Cambodia's most celebrated king. Its 54 Gothic towers are decorated with 216 gargantuan smiling faces of Avalokiteshvara, and it is adorned with 1.2km of extraordinary bas-reliefs incorporating more than 11,000 figures.

The temple's eastward orientation leads most people to visit in the morning. However, Bayon looks equally good around late afternoon.

During the day we took some time out to rest, re-charge and have lunch at an on-site Restaurant with a great choice of food that had an amazing view of the Temples, too much to absorb and take in, realising where we were and what we were witnessing.

Later our guide spoke to the group and presented us with options about the 2-day tour, and it was a unanimous decision by the group to condense the 2 days into 1 day, although long and taxing it was well worth the experience.

So, we all strived forward in the rain and muddy paths to push on to experience the most popular and most visited Temples/Sites.

The best day of the trip for me by far, even though the 4 countries and places we visited were special, my personal purpose and reason for the trip was to see and experience Angkor Wat. So many photos, so many moments, so many laughs and memories.

So back to the Hotel to get ready for a night out, a Buffet Dinner and traditional dance night. So not have the energy, but somehow find extra, Holiday energy from deep, very deep within.

The Apsaras, in the Khmer traditional culture, are female spirits of the clouds and waters and supernatural female dancers in the Hindu mythology. These nymphs have become some of the most symbolic characters in many bas-reliefs at the temples of Angkor, representing through their dances many passages of the classic Khmer culture. You can't fully experience Cambodia without watching an Apsara dance Siem Reap show. Wearing glittering silk tunics, sequined tops and elaborate golden headdresses, the dancers execute their movements with great deftness and deliberation; knees bent in pli , heels touching the floor first at each step, coy smiles on their faces. The restrained, feather-light dance style evokes the grandeur and elegance of the Angkor era.

In the past there were thousands of Apsara dancers at the royal court performing exclusively for the king, however only a few of them survived the ravages of the Khmer Rouge (the Cambodian Communist Party) that nearly extinguished the genre. It was not until 1995, 16 years after the fall of the Khmer Rouge, that Cambodians once again witnessed a public performance of Apsara dance, at Angkor Wat. Nowadays Cambodian children, once they will be 7, will be chosen for their aptitude, their flexibility and the elegance of their hands to receive dance training. It takes them about 6 years to learn the 1,500 intricate positions, and a further 3 to 6 years to attain the required level of artistic maturity.

Along with the carefully choreographed performance, a large and well set-out buffet or set-menu dinner is served. The variety to choose from was very good for finicky eaters, and to get some relief from Asian cuisine, as there was BBQ and many assorted other cuisines to choose from.

So, now after a HUGE day, full belly it was time to literally crash as both Karen & I were physically drained, sleep, sleep and more sleep.

3 Aug Breakfast, to fuel up for a big day of trekking for me, going to Quad Bike around Siem Reap, through the backstreets, through rice fields and local villages with Cambodia Quad Bikes.

Cambodia Quad Bike is located in Siem Reap, not far from the Old Market, where we as a group Come and explored off road tracks, rice fields, forgotten temples and life in local communities with our professional guides. We stopped at several locations for photo opportunities and also a walking tour through a rice field with some information about plantation patterns, growth and picking of crops.

Was a super fund-day out and about for me while Karen stayed back with others, rested, shopped a little and coffee. So, after

I returned we gathered ourselves up for a walk to the Markets and Pub Street with others to do some last-minute shopping, bargain hunting for headphones, souvenirs and alike. We found another market section across the bridge where we bartered for some Bose Bluetooth headphones (real-ones) and portable speakers.

Finally bought what we were after and headed back to main section of Market to barter some more, T-shirts and souvenir were the main focus. Once this was done we headed for Pub Street and found a nice open-air Café restaurant and had a late lunch where we ran into others from our group.

Pub Street may be most well-known as a fantastic nightlife attraction of Siem Reap, but it is also an ideal place to have a flavourful dining experience at any time of the day. Pub Street is lined end to end with some of the best restaurants and bars in the country.

After lunch it was time to head back tour Hotel and found others lazing by the Hotel Pool. Great idea we thought, so indulge we did to re-charge and relax. So elegant was Karen in her bathers and sarong to lady like and elegantly sit on the edge of the pool.

NOT, when she slipped on the wet edge and feel so awkwardly into the pool, wet and drenched in all her glory. So empathetic were we all in Karen's plight, and all burst out laughing at the style and grace of the fall. So, to was Karen's own surprise that she too fell into fits of laughter, great holiday moment.

Later that day as part of G Adventures and Planaterra the group took the opportunity to visit the New Hope Vocational Training Centre, where the people of Cambodia are still rebuilding the country following the genocide of 1975-1979. One of the biggest economic drivers is the beautiful Angkor Wat complex just outside of Siem Reap, but the ripple effects of tourism are still not reaching some of the most vulnerable groups.

Further, there is a lack of training programs, access to education, and vocational training for adults.

In 2010, G Adventures and Planeterra worked with New Hope Outreach Centre to build a training restaurant to support young Khmers living just outside of Siem Reap. G Adventures travellers raised \$65,000 CAD to build the restaurant and provide professional training to young adults that expressed interest in the hospitality industry. The training program is a six-month commitment and our ground partners assist with full-time job placement in one of the many burgeoning hotels, resorts and restaurants in the Siem Reap region.

Since the restaurant became fully operational in 2011, G Adventures has annually sent 8,500 customers and travellers to the training restaurant. Twenty-five trainees have been through this program and have found placements in careers in the hospitality industry. The proceeds from the traveller's meals support over 1,000 student's education and 1,000 free medical check-ups through New Hope's Outreach program. With the success of this training restaurant, G Adventures also helped fund the Bakong Training Cafe.

So after the talks and explanations by the guides we all stay for a served lunched, cooked and served by the students of the Centre. Lunch was divers and nice.

After lunch there was another speech about funding and ongoing support needed to fund the Centre, and I bought in support a beautifully made bracelet of multi-colours and inscription of the 'New Hope' Centre.

To date I still wear and cherish this bracelet as it protects me on my many diving and travel holidays.

Later we changed and dried and went to dinner at a close local American Style flavoured Restaurant for a quick easy dinner as we were to head out the next morning.

Well, another dining experience (like China) where Karen who ordered the simplest of meals (Soup) did not get her meal after everyone else got their steaks, chicken grille dishes etc.

Back to the Hotel to tidy, pack and stay in for the night before and early wake-up and Border Crossing.

4 Aug Bus ride to the Border, but not quite as simple as other crossings, here we had to walk across and through many different stations. Luckily our luggage was taken by cart as a group, (trusted & secure – we hoped).

Whether you take a direct bus, mini-bus or taxi, you'll still have to walk across the border from Poipet to Aranyaprathet on the Thailand side. Coming from Siem Reap, you'll get dropped off at a roundabout near the border in Poipet. Walk straight ahead and you'll see Cambodia immigration on your right side.

So, first step was to wait in line, many lines with MANY people in a tiny open style building, as we suffered from the open elements of the heat and humidity. Once our passports and visas were checked, stamped and verified, again wait in line outside in the direct sun. Finally, we were directed to start walking across the road, down the side of a bridge (walkway). I said to Karen 'Are we just walking across the border??' and then this pathway led us to another building, up the stairs and inside to another sheep line to present out passports and visas'.

Once you're refreshed, keep walking straight until you get to Thai immigration and go upstairs.

Once you are at the border just remember that you need to be stamped out of the country you came from and get a visa for the country you are entering (so two stops).

Once you're through, go straight if you're heading to get a mini-bus or taxi or make your first right towards Rong Kleu Market if you're catching a casino bus. This road is not paved and you'll think you're in some sort of post-apocalyptic fantasy novel, but in a moment, you'll see a 7-11 and realize that you're actually in Thailand. From 7-11, you can turn right to head to the casino buses in the car park area.

Once through the Immigration/Customs Officers we walked out, down the stairs and to a huge open area hoping there were no more Stations or Customs areas to navigate. I was confident that we had finally made into Thailand as we passed under a huge Kingdom of Thailand monument style arch.

Finally, we were back on a bus headed for our last stop, the Centra Central Station Hotel Bangkok, where we started this amazing 29 day encompassed tour of 4 Countries.

Finally arrived to the Hotel and booked into our rooms for our final night of the tour. Cheryl took the opportunity to go to a local large Electronics mall to purchase a camera for her next trip to China, as her camera failed at the beginning of the trip, and she continued for the whole 29 days hoping the photos taken would work (they did not).

So, Karen, myself, Kyle & Vicki took a walk to the malls for a search for Chemist and other stuff. Well, didn't that turn out to be another infamous holiday travel lost experience. We asked for directions from a random, and he was adamant we should head to the Marina as other places were closed.

I was in fits of laughter, and we ignored his advice and kept on walking, however the wrong way, and then saw him again.

We all did our best to hide from him, and kept on walking, in the right direction this time, and then caught a Tuk Tuk in front of the train station to the large mall where we felt we need to be, it was not.

After walking the Mall for a while just being polite and buying some hydrocortisone cream we stopped for a coffee and cake to relax and chat some more.

Then, it was the challenge to get home, we knew how to but trying to convince a Tuk Tuk driver to take all 4 of us for only 100 Baht was seemingly a non-event. Driver after driver we tried and even though our language communication was poor, it became very clear when arguing over money.

Finally, we found a younger male, who we seem felt 100Baht is better than no fare, so we all squeezed in and enjoyed a fun filled drive home to Hotel.

The final curtain call was to have our Farewell Dinner as a group....well organised chaos that seemed to become. There were a few of us that wanted to have dinner where we had our first group dinner, however as normal Nak was on a mission to convince us to have dinner at a Rooftop Restaurant with views and good food.

The majority finally won, and Karen & I didn't want to create a scene and went along with the others. Well, again a typical let down and un-truths told by Nak. The so-called roof-top Restaurant was low par along with-it food at high prices. We complained to Nak and said we should ge elsewhere as a few people were struggling with finances etc, again we stayed.

The food was served and was poor quality, especially for the pricing, again confirming Nak's kickbacks with places to meet his own agenda.

After we made our way to the roo-top to take in our last night-time view and lights of Bangkok (Thailand) before departing from our 29 day adventure and family/friends we experienced with.....

That was an emotional departure, but again Nak ruined the moment by going on and on about how good he was, hoping as a Family we would give him a 10 score so he could advance in G Adventures and win a trip, again confirmation his agenda about the holiday and optional extra event were all about him, him enjoying his time, and we were there to pay for him, other way around Nak, you are our paid CEO to ensure our holiday is memorable.

Enough said on this topic, and back to Hotel to sleep, pack and prepare for departure. But not before a final night-cap at the outdoor Bar/Water feature with a small group.

5 Aug Breakfast, and time to say our final goodbyes in Reception to those who still remained, swap details, FB and emails etc. Karen became quite emotional in her goodbyes with some of the girls and younger ones (Mum), but especially with Cheryl.

Time was at hand, we had to move on and get our transfer to the Airport to end this incredible Adventure and Rivetting Moments.

Arrival at Airport, check in luggage and get Boarding Passes and find our way through Customs/Immigration and then to wait, waste time until departure.....Australia Bound (Going Home).