



Asia 2018, Part 1

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So... I really couldn't prep for this trip until I had finished putting together my first year of Humanities class. And while that class was a huge success, it took me 53 weeks to put it together, basically from the last month of school last year until three weeks before school got out this year. This class took up all of my available time six days a week, every week, without breaks. Still, I managed to start an Asia plan and get it into rough shape during my available breaks. I sketched-out a plan for the trip during Thanksgiving Break, finalized the route during Christmas Break and bought plane tickets and reserved hotels during Ski Week in February. Nothing else was planned, so I have been furiously planning the final details of this trip in the three weeks leading up to the start of the trip. Oh ya, I also set-up the 2020 Israel/Oberammergau trip and taught Adult Ed on Sundays during this time too. I kind of like the pressure -- I work best under pressure and a hard deadline -- but this sort of planning won't necessarily guarantee a thoroughly trouble-free trip... which would be my preference. For past trips, it would not be unusual for me to put in 500 hours of careful planning. Not this trip! We're winging it! But should I wing Asia? Remember, this is a place I haven't been to in 40 years with the exception of China, and China is not on the itinerary. Everything on this trip is new for me. Fortunately, travel is not new, so I'll be using my best practices from previous trips as much as possible. I have also ditched all forms of books for the first time and I'm using TripAdvisor and google flights as my planning tools. It's what the cool kids are using now, and I want to be a cool kid. One thing I tried that I can now recommend for this kind of trip: stapling your currency in Ziploc bags on a folder. It fits securely in the bottom of your rucksack. I didn't want to go looking for ATMs in the middle of these countries, so I wound up carrying \$8K in foreign currency at the start of the trip.

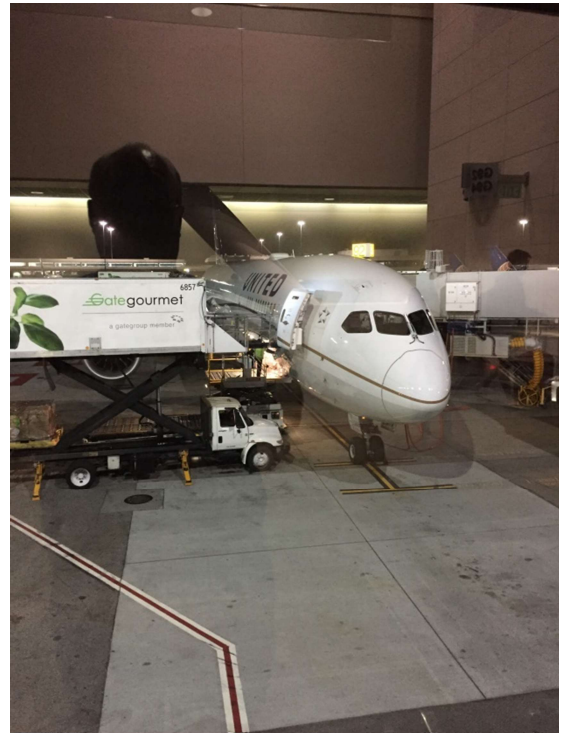


6/13 – We spent much of the day packing. The clothes had been sprayed with scotch guard and permethrin over the last 36 hours and now it was time to pack it all away. I'm packing light on clothes as usual, but I'm also allowing some luxury items in the bag this time, since this is a 40 day trip. My bag is usually 18-20 pound at the start of any trip but its 31 pounds this time due to the addition of Bose noise-cancelling headphones, an umbrella, ample precautionary drugs, a gel seat and a case of power bars (all items that I would not usually pack). I figured that the power bars and drugs would diminish as I bought Hart Rock t-shirts and souvenirs. So long as I can keep the bag under 44 pounds, I'll be fine on any plane. Oh ya, this journal that I'm writing in is also pretty heavy, as is the 600 page Sci Fi book that I brought along. Also new for this trip is a battery pack to recharge my cell phone. Some things I don't have: travel books and a camera. Both are now on my cell phone. Also, I do plan on throwing some clothes away during the trip. I brought "rags" for some of the messier days. I also traded in my traditional jacket for a poncho. I seriously doubt that I'll need a jacket on this trip, but I can always buy one about the time I chuck the poncho. The advanced weather report shows that its 87-90 degrees with high humidity and daily thunderstorms everywhere we're going. The low temps will never dip below 68. I think my "no jacket" plan will be fine.

Courtney drove us to SFO without incident at 7:30PM. Being that this is a Wednesday, I was up at 5:40 this morning for my weekly breakfast meeting with Bery. I hope, for once, that I can sleep on the plane. Anyway, two of my luxury items, the gel seat and the power bars, got flagged at security as possible explosive devices. We weren't in a hurry, so it was not a problem. Our terminal was mostly empty when we arrived.

6/14-15 - Yes, we skipped a day going over the International Date Line. We'll get the day back on the way back.

So many kids on this flight – many of them crying and whining at some point during the night. My goal, of course, was to sleep as much as possible on this 16.5 hour flight. For the first two hours, I could not sleep because the family behind us did not sleep. Might there be a reason as to why some parents don't really control their kids (I see evidence of "non-parenting" at school, but I really haven't studied permissive parenting – is that even a thing?)? Maybe it's just their style – I don't know – I'm tired! Whatever, it doesn't work on this United red-eye flight. These kids were super annoying, loud and they kept kicking my chair. Usually, with this extreme permissiveness in parenting, like I witnessed, the kids turn out cocky, whiny and entitled. Some (certainly not all), even defy authority figures like parents and teachers, which is something I've seen a time or two. The two kids in this family were around 7 and 10 years old. They definitely did not respect their parents or anyone else on the plane. The mom spent two hours trying to talk over the kids (loudly) by trying to reason with them. The dad talked loudly too, telling the mom what she should be saying to the kids but never talking directly to the kids himself. I'm sure many around this family wanted to murder them. Everyone, except maybe Barbara, was trying to sleep from the moment they got on the plane. Barbara was entertained watching 12 Strong, so I watched her screen with my blindfolds on my eyebrows rather than my eyes. As the movie ended, the two kids fell asleep for about 10 hours and there was much rejoicing.



I'm pretty sure I slept some over the next six hours; though I'm not sure I ever achieved REM sleep. I was hot and cold and Barbara kept moving while sleeping on me. I tried earplugs and a neck pillow but the earplugs weren't enough and the neck pillow made my neck sweat. Time did move quickly though, so that was good.

From hours 8 through 16.5, I watched movies. My Bose headphones were so much better than those earplugs! I should have worn those to bed.

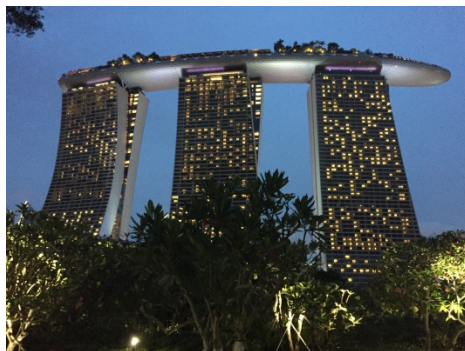
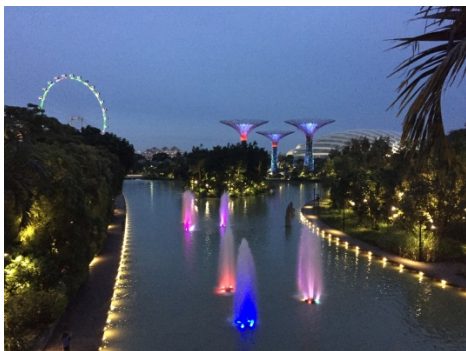


The flight wasn't a total disaster: the food was acceptable, my new gel cushion worked great and I got to see four good movies: A Wrinkle In Time; Downsized; Maze Runner 3; and Game Night. Also, I was surrounded by quite the international crowd and it was nice to meet them or eavesdrop on them. There was a large contingent of Indian folks in the rows behind us. Off to Barbara's left was an Italian guy who has spent the last six months going around the world (but mostly to Arizona). Ahead of us, we had a German gal, a Singaporean gal and a Chinese American guy who is currently a chef in Texas and is being interviewed in Singapore for a head chef job. The guy was big with a round face and a Japanese Samurai haircut (remember, he's Chinese - weird). By the end of the flight, he had switched seats with the Singaporean and was really connecting with the German girl who seemed to be really into him. When we got to the airport, it was still dark – all 16.5 hours had been in total darkness. The temp was already 87 degrees at 6:20AM when we exited the plane.

Day 1, 6/15 – We had six hours to kill at the airport before Jeffrey arrived. We hit Starbucks before walking through three very long terminals. We found out where Jeffrey would be arriving and then we parked nearby at a Burger King. We got bored of Burger King after an hour and Barb wanted lunch so we moved downstairs to a couple of curry places. We somehow missed Jeffrey because his flight arrived early and his messaging wasn't working. We tried the white courtesy phone, which did not work, so we ultimately got on the train to town, looking for him all the way. Just as we got on the train, Jeff called. He had taken a taxi and was already at the hotel. Oh ya, with all the walking in my throw-away airplane socks that I hadn't thrown away and was still wearing, I managed to get a sizable blister on the bottom of my right foot. It now bothered me as I walked a mile in the muggy heat to the hotel. Jeff found us and we attempted to check in. The room wasn't ready yet so we chatted for an hour outside. Eventually, our very generic room was ready. We dropped our stuff off and left. Jeff told us that taxis were fast and cheap here so no need to learn the bus system. We taxi'd to Buddha Tooth which is absolutely Buddhist, but our taxi driver dropped us off at the nearby Hindu Temple... which he thought was Buddha Tooth. This wasn't a problem because both were in Chinatown which is where we wanted to be. This Chinatown is smaller and less interesting than San Francisco's. We were told to try the satay at a hawker place (a street-food food court). We liked the Dim Sum but didn't like the satay at this hawker place. It was too sweet. We also had a hard time finding napkins. In this culture, apparently, you bring your own and if you don't, you are chastised by the vendors. We sent Jeffrey out to find napkins. He did not find any. It turns out that "napkins" are small Kleenex packs and they are sold in convenience stores. We also noticed that these packets were being used to reserve tables.



With dinner out of the way, we walked beyond Chinatown towards the bay. We noticed that many of the high-rise buildings had plants growing on them in very inventive ways. There were gardens on the roof, potted plants on every floor and one building had plants growing up the entire side of the building. I really dug the organic look. We passed some high-end apartments and across a field to what looked like a huge construction zone. Blacked-out chain-link fence surrounded an entire block that must have been a half mile long (no exaggeration). Inside wasn't construction though, but three stages with a laser light show and heart pounding bass coming out of some pretty big speakers. Hey, I went to my first rave! OK, we walked by this half mile long multi rave event. Lots of kids in were walking around in designer underwear and lingerie, but they were still more fully dressed than any US rave event that I'd seen in pictures from my students. We walked to the nearby Marina Bay Sands Hotel and walked around, eventually taking the bridge to the Gardens for the light show just as the sun was setting. You could see the futuristic domes and fake trees pretty well on this bridge. You could also see the rave event across the way. The music still pounded. We descended into the Gardens. These gardens were great but the light show started, then stopped... and did not start again. With no light show that night, apparently, we taxi'd home and went to bed.



Day 2, 6/16 – We were all up at 6, ready to go. Alas, the bus doesn't start until 9. We took things really slowly. For breakfast, we went across the street to a hawker (street food) place. It was an excellent choice. Barbara tried a mixed bowl of "stuff": noodles and many kinds of meat in a thick congee sauce. Jeff and I had eggs and toast with coffee – loose, runny eggs that you pour into a bowl and add pepper and soy sauce to. After that, we leisurely strolled to the massive Suntec Mall where our "Hippo" bus would be (we eventually found the depot outside at the back of the mall). We were still a bit early, so we went to a convenience store and stocked up on liquids. I got a Pocari Sweat and a yogurt smoothie for the bus ride. We opted to ride up top because it was not yet hot. We saw Little India, the Muslim (Malay) Quarter and Chinatown. We got off at Buddha Tooth (the real one) and saw a lot of chanting going on inside. Throughout the city, incense is in the air, but more so here next to this shrine. It must be prayer day. We took a taxi to Sentosa Island. This is where Trump and Kim Jung Un had their historic first meeting only four days ago. Jeff was hoping to see evidence of the meeting, like flags in the streets, but no luck, so we went to the Hard Rock Hotel. I bought a t-shirt. This was my 34th Hard Rock according to my record/receipt. After that, we taxi'd to Merlion Park. Near Hard Rock, there is a giant Merlion, so I had to specify which one. THE Merlion location is very pretty, but the sun came out and it was now hot. We got ice cream. I chose durian. It was very fresh, but that taste would stay with me for the rest of the day (literally, not figuratively at all – I kept burping up durian for the remainder of the day).



The goal for the afternoon was to walk around the old downtown and look at the historic buildings. We did see a few, but I kept getting us lost. I guess I'm better with a paper map than Google Maps. Let's just say that we saw a bit more Singapore, including the very expensive Clark Quay, which put us on the wrong side of the "Battlebox" park, this massive cliff wall of a place, so we backtracked and went around the big rock so we could go to a highly recommended hawker place. The fried potsticker dumplings were excellent. After lunch, we went to the National Museum. Barb and I got discounts for showing them a picture of our classrooms (our teacher IDs were not valid enough). A discount was warranted too – two of four floors were under construction. Barbara spent a lot of time looking for a tea room on the fifth floor. She didn't know that a traditional tea room is really nothing more than a box that you crawl into. She was looking for a Western teahouse.

For two floors, we walked through closed and/or empty rooms. I remarked that this was easily the most underwhelming museum I had ever been to. That was meant to be a joke, but even after we saw some art, my opinion stayed true.



We took the bus to the Suntec Mall. What a huge place! We walked all over. We then took the bus back to our hotel. For dinner, we opted to go to Little India. I found what appeared to be a good place on Yelp. We walked a mile to get to it. The place was called Khansama Tandoori Restaurant and their specialty was butter chicken. This was easily the best Indian food I have ever had. I actually really liked the basmati rice and butter-garlic naan even more than the butter chicken. After dinner, we went a few blocks to the massive Mustafa Center, which was simply packed with people. The place had many stairs and many small aisles. There were guards all over, so there was probably a lot of petty theft here as well. After that visit, we taxi'd back to our hotel and went to the roof (with infinity pool!) and took pictures of this beautiful city.

France beat Australia today in World Cup action.

It's supposed to rain all day tomorrow.



Day 3, 6/17 – First, a quirk of this nation that is beginning to get to me. Napkins are not a thing at street food places. You must bring your own and if you don't, you get yelled at, as though you are supposed to know better. The napkins are never found near the hawker stands. You must seek them out in some corner store several blocks away. These Kleenex packets are also pretty expensive because they are required items when you go out to eat. We figured that we had to buy some today just so we could show our faces in any hawker place. We went to our cross the street hawker place again for breakfast and again, I got runny eggs with coffee and toast. Jeffrey found a convenience store with Kleenex a block away.

We were not in a hurry today because things didn't open until 9. We went to the Sands Hotel first on the off chance it was open early. It was not, so we took the bridge over to the fake trees in the Garden, which were open. The tree bridge offered really nice views. For the first time, we saw ships in the bay – many ships! Now I can see why this place was such a strategic location for England back in the day. The bathroom near the trees was this indoor/outdoor thing that was pretty awesome. Peeing in nature.





Next up were the two domes. One was a rainforest and one was a desert & forest. I expected one to be hot and humid (sort of how it was outside today) and one to be simply hot. Much to our surprise, both were cool. We went in the rainforest dome first and were greeted with a giant waterfall and mist all around. There was a big section of orchids. An elevator took you to the top of the waterfall and then you slowly descended. It reminded me of the Matterhorn ride at Disney because inside was hollow and filled with curious things, but ramps would also take us outside for some really good views. The base of this tropical mountain had this gorgeous garden. Even the bathrooms were garden-themed (at least the men's was – the women's was simply beige).



Our goal was to go directly to the next dome, but we went out the first exit we saw, rather than up the escalator as we should have, and we wound up on some jogging track on the back side of the dome with no way back inside. We had to walk around the entire dome. We were hot and tired by the time we got to the entrance of the desert/forest dome. Inside, we saw desert plants and then on the back side, we saw forest plants. One section was dedicated to pollen-producing plants. I didn't go in there. All throughout the place there were these gorgeous driftwood animals that looked life-like, even a dragon. Nice Art! Once we got out, we



walked over to the science museum, but found this giant mall first. Such a pretty mall! Singapore has the best malls! Jeff wanted Starbucks so we went down three floors. I had a nitrogen latte with sweet cream (try to find that in a US Starbucks!). Jeff had a panna cotta latte that had cheese chunks in it. Barb had a matcha tea. I have not seen any of these flavors elsewhere. I had brought several Starbucks cards with me that students have given me over the years, but none of

them worked in Asia apparently. Sigh.

We got to the science museum but the room I most wanted to see was closed. On the plus side, they charged us the kid price. On the minus side, this was a children's science museum. It was really weak and we were through the place in 15 minutes. What a colossal waste of money! Nearby was the Sands Hotel so we decided to go to the top. The price was steep, but the views were spectacular. It's too bad they wouldn't let us go to the ultimate infinity pool or the rooftop forest. That section was reserved for hotel guests. One thing we could see well was the lagoon where there were periodic boat races, airplane races (the Red Bull Series) and concerts. I had seen this bay before because this is where one of those airplanes crashed during competition. On the far side of the bay was the Merlion.



We went back down, saw some fancy cars that you could rent (a Ferrari, a Lambo and a Bentley), then headed to the bus stop to pick up our Hippo bus. 25 minutes later, we came to the conclusion that the bus didn't stop here so we taxi'd to the Hippo port at Suntec. It turns out that the bus we wanted wasn't covered by our pass anyway so we took the bus that was on our pass. It was a nice hour-long ride, but I had drunk a Pocari Sweat and my stomach was now upset. (BTW – Pocari Sweat is Asia's answer to Gatorade. It's actually better than Gatorade in many ways, and certainly better for diabetics, but its mineral content takes some getting used to, hence the initial stomach ache). That bus ride did me in! It was now time for an early dinner but I didn't want to eat. Barb and Jeff were hungry though. I had planned to eat in the Muslim Quarter near our hotel, but Jeff wanted to eat at the Mall's food court. This worked out fine because we could stay in A/C and then go direct home via taxi afterwards. We chose a ramen place. My gyoza was really good, but that ramen – wow!



We had maybe 30 minutes in our hotel before a bus would pick us up for the night safari. The bus was prompt and nice and it took us to Buddha Tooth in Chinatown. I found my souvenir for Singapore there – a Merlion. Jeff and I also bought strong coffee while Barb learned more about Buddhism. A big bus took us to the night safari, which was pure pandemonium – bodies and long lines everywhere. Fortunately, we had our own line and got on a train immediately. The 40 minute ride in the dark, looking at mildly lit animals, was a fun experience. After that, we walked the big cat trail. It was crowded until our guide released us to explore. We got lost a lot, but hey, it's an enclosed park. How lost can you get? The signage was almost non-existent. We found a nice bathroom though, and for once, the women's bathroom was just as nice as the men's (Barb was getting sad that in this male-dominated society, only the males got the interesting bathrooms, so she was really happy here.). We power-walked our way back to the entrance and bought drinks. Once I had stopped moving, I began sweating like Niagara Falls. I was pouring juice into my body as fast as sweat was going out!

The line for the animal show was large. Some people were cutting in line all over too (not any of the European folks – they all had the same look I had, that WTF look). I have heard that “gaining an advantage” in some cultures is seen as good, and totally acceptable within that culture. It certainly clashed with my American sensibilities! In this way, these folks are similar to the Italians and French who also don't recognize lines and routinely piss off the British and Americans who like to queue for any reason. The show, by the way, was good, though the first 10 minutes of this 30 minute show featured “No Flash” in 20 languages. I guess animals don't like that. But unlike other places, once the inevitable flash did occur, security was on them immediately and those people were removed.

At the end of the show, we walked back to our bus briskly because we had to be there by a certain time. We beat that time by 3 minutes bus were also just about the last people on the bus. We got home on time though.

Day 4, 6/18 – We got up really late because we had gotten to bed late. Plus, it had been a really long day yesterday. Today would be the same, but for a different reason. None of us wanted a local breakfast this morning so we packed our stuff and headed off to Starbucks. With that done, we taxied to the airport. When we got there, the Singaporean efficiency that we had come to expect had gone away. There were lines all over. It turned out to be due to a power outage at AirAsia. We stood in lines going nowhere for about two hours. Eventually, we were taken to a different counter to be processed... just as we had gotten to the front of our previous line. We were given food vouchers and free drinks as an apology, but the vouchers could only be used at restaurants prior to security check-in! We went to lunch because we were told that our flight was delayed two hours. When we attempted to get through security, we couldn't. Our "delayed" flight decided not to be delayed and we had missed it. We were not alone in this – anyone who had actually used the food vouchers missed the flight. We all got booked on a flight that left five hours later. With abundant time on our hands, we wandered and I caught up on my journal. Eventually, we found this cute looking wall with building facades all along it and vendors down below. What we didn't know was that some of these facades were actually a video screen that sometimes opened up to see mini-plays inside the buildings. It was quite a site to see, and really hard to explain unless you were there. This airport is truly amazing!



The flight to Bali was uneventful. We breezed through security and Praise God! Our driver was there to pick us up. This airport was not so amazing, but had character. It was small and functional, but that's about it. The ride, in the dark, was the sort of stuff you would expect in a third world country – suicidal cycles riding in and around cars and trucks that were not using any lane markers – Brownian motion driving. Our hotel was a little more rustic than I had hoped for, but it still had lots of charm. I especially liked the outdoor bathroom facilities.





Day 5, 6/19 – We were up way before the sun, which doesn't show up until 7:15. It was a nice overcast day and not hot at all. It's winter in Bali. Breakfast was delicious: fresh fruit drinks and coconut/pineapple stuffed pancakes with toast accompanied by mango marmalade and local honey. The local Bali coffee is ground fine and unfiltered, like Greece/Turkey. We got to meet some of the neighbors at breakfast: Indonesians, Brits, Americans and Germans. Our driver for the day, Bunk (pronounced Boon), was prompt and we left at 9. Today was Ubud day, the town we were currently in. We had four must-see items to do and the rest we would make up as we went along. Our

first stop was close, Goa Gajah, or the Elephant Cave, a 9th century Hindu temple complex with a cave dedicated to the elephant god Ganesha. It was a lot of stairs down to the temple. Many there were actively rebuilding some of the complex because an earthquake some time ago had leveled most of the stone temples and houses there. Repairs were slow and most sites we would see today would show evidence of destruction and rebuilding. Piles of stones were neatly arranged at this site to be reused if



possible, but not much remained so a lot of custom brickwork was being done on site. Down in a ravine, we saw more evidence of even earlier destruction. I felt more like Laura Croft than Indiana Jones (except for maybe part 3) because everything was dark rock Hindu stuff, not Egyptian or Mayan.



Our next stop was not a "must-do" but was recommended by Bunk. It was a waterfall. The hike down was a little slippery. There were stacked rocks all over. I did not expect that, but it made sense because rock stacking is a meditative exercise. Quite a few were in the water, mostly European women by the looks of it, but some Japanese women as well. We were ambling around, enjoying the spectacle of it all when it began to rain. We took this as our sign that we should head back up the cliff. So many stairs! Waterproofing clothes is great because it keeps the rain out, but it also keeps the sweat in. I was wet inside and out by the time we got to the top of the cliff wall.

Our driver suggested that we go to a coffee plantation next to learn how Bali coffee is made. We learned so much there! Our guide was excellent and he showed us Bali coffee, Arabica coffee and Luwak coffee, which is also Arabica coffee, but fed to a luwak and pooped out, rinsed off and dried out, creating a super mellow coffee. The luwaks they had on site were sleepy but also very aggressive. You would be too if you were kept in a cage and fed coffee all day. We learned about (super spicy) red ginger, the more typical yellow ginger and cacao. We had a tasting of 12 teas



and coffees at the end. The lemongrass and red ginger varieties were my favorite teas and of

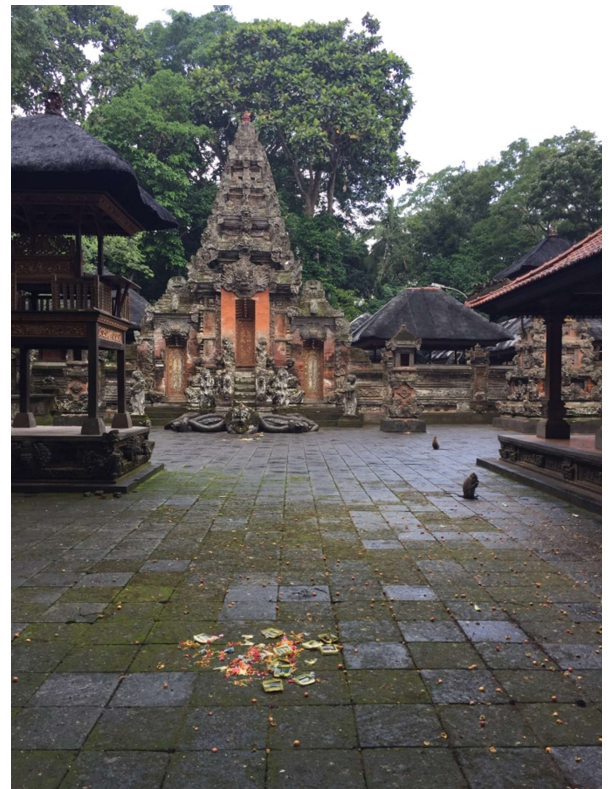


course Jeffrey and I had the Luwak coffee. It was very good and very mellow. Jeff and I bought some and Barb bought several teas. It continued to rain. My new super fancy umbrella, purchased specifically for this trip, was amazing. Also, my waterproof shoes are indeed waterproof. I'm so happy I spent the time, money and energy right before the trip to invest in quality gear.



Next stop was to the monkey forest. The ticket taker said that today was not a good day for monkeys because they hide in the rain. Still, we saw plenty of monkeys and it was a nice walk too. I guess, according to a sign we saw, that so long as we don't feed the monkeys or look directly at them (a sign of aggression), we would be fine, and we were.

Others who did these things got attacked. It was funny. One monkey was eating a map. Most were eating the daily Hindu offerings that were all over the ground in Bali. In the center of the monkey forest is the "Temple of Death" – I kid you not! (The 14th century Dalem Agung Padangtegal temple) No one was in



that temple, except for monkeys, and the outside had all these scary creatures in stone guarding the place. It was a pretty cool place to visit. There was also a stone bridge with scary dragons along the sides. We somehow wound up outside the park nowhere near the entrance so Jeff took this opportunity to hit an ATM... once he could find one. He eventually found one, but could not find a SIM card for his phone. While he was gone, we watched monkeys on a phone line over a busy street looking kind of freaked-out. We also got our bearings and found a road/path that led back to the entrance of the park. We trudged back to the awaiting minivan.

Lunch was next and our driver took us (without even asking) to the place we wanted to go to get authentic Indonesian BBQ. This was the place that Travel and Leisure Magazine raved about, yet was only rated 3.7 on Yelp. The Yelp folks were right – the meat was dry and a portion of the dish was so spicy we couldn't eat it. It also didn't help that I put peppers on my rice and the juice got everywhere, resulting in very hot rice. These peppers were not normal – they were freaks of nature.

The rice patties were the last stop. Barbara was looking forward to this site because she had never been to a rice patty; I was dreading this part of the trip because I had. Sure enough, it was steep with questionable stairs made of many thin, slippery paths. It was also raining. Some of the mud stairs were propped-up with bamboo, which is also



slippery when wet. I managed not to die, but the climb back up was brutal. I have had enough of this version of Indonesian stair-stepping today! And again, compliments to the Rockport shoe guys – your trekking shoes are super dangerous on smooth, wet surfaces, but awesome on mud and volcanic rock.

On the way home, it poured so bad that water was up to the top of the curb in most places. Motorcyclists were losing their flip-flops as they tried to ride/ski through the water. We got in a traffic jam. It took 2 hours to get home and our hotel was maybe 5 miles away and in the same town. Everyone seemed to be dressed up. Guys were in white linen; girls were in white and or saffron yellow outfits. The gals also had baskets of fruit balanced on their heads.

When we got back, it was completely dark at around 6:30. We paid Bunk and set up a drive for tomorrow.

We decided to go to town for dinner. “Town” should be in quotes because it was just a few places here and there. We were not actually in the major town of Ubud, but deep in a rice patty suburb. We opted for a place that was pretty much street food. We sat down and there were no menus, just a random collection of drinks in the center of the table. No server came, just three plates that looked similar to lunch: rice with random bits of meat and veggies, though the



selection here was more “street food” than BBQ. You know, our place was empty but the place next door was booming – I guess we should have gone there. We selected our drinks then ate. About the time we finished, a man in all white started speaking to us. He was a 70 year old pensioner with five children. In retirement, he cleaned the nearby temple after big events, like the big event that was happening tonight. In his younger days, he did construction. He had constructed the pool at our hotel. Well, tonight was an island-wide Hindu festival and he invited us as honored guests to come join him. He even followed us on his squeaky motorbike to ensure we got there. He happened to have three spare sarongs in the seat of his motorbike for honored guests (how

handy!). It was quite festive inside. There were temple shrines for Brahma, Shiva and Vishnu (the “big three” that represented fire, water and earth and were also colored red, yellow and white) plus a lot more, including a large stone

penis and vulva to pray to for those who could not conceive. Our guide directed us to the guy musician kang and the girl musician kang (a kang is a raised platform). Each group would have a chance to play, though not in unison and sometimes in competition with each other. The girls started to play these glockenspiel things (hammers on metal plates) while women in yellow, young and old, danced in formation like a line dance. It began to rain so we stood (and later sat) at the edge of the women’s kang. With the women’s dance done, the next entertainment was called “the masks” dance because two gents would wear masks to tell a story. Initially, each took a turn dancing, and then they dialoged and danced together. Each time they came out, they wore different



masks depicting different ages of a person and their dialogue was about intergenerational strife. Our host kept grabbing our cell phones to take pictures of his two friends – the “mask” actors. All the music the women played sounded like the



various musical themes from Minecraft (which I love, by the way). Our guide had attached himself to other white guests who were there (from our hotel) and he was taking pictures with their cell phones as well. As some guy began sprinkling all the kneeling folks on the grass with water, our guide announced that it was now time for prayer and guests were not allowed at this part of the ceremony. We were rushed out. It was alright with me. I was about ready to make a gracious exit anyway. We gave him the sarongs back and he asked us for 200K (\$15) for his services. We had no problem with this because he had been a gracious and informative host. We got home and did a lot of laundry... in the rain. We wound up hanging everything inside.

Along the way, I discovered that I had laundered all my Bali money. It too would need to dry.

Day 6, 6/20 – Today should be a much easier day, though it was still raining a bit. I moved all the clothes outside. Breakfast was once again wonderful and our driver was again prompt. The drive to the lake temple (Pura Ulun Danu Bratan, 17th century) would take us two hours. Many along the road were cleaning up from last night's festivities, but at least one temple was still in full swing. Music was still blaring out of it and people were entering and exiting.



It rained much of the way there and it was actually a bit gloomy and cold today, which was fine with me. The temple by the lake was shrouded in fog, giving it an ethereal look. Not everything had been cleaned up from last night and today, they were setting up for their 4th annual art show (no doubt for tourists) so there was a lot of activity and light construction going on. We took many pictures, but couldn't get any of the iconic lake pictures of the temple due to the fog. Jeff and I somehow lost Barbara in the fog. We kept texting our locations, but never met up until we found the van. When we got in the van, Bunk asked "where next?" We had no answer for him so he said "I will take you to the tall grass." Great, I thought, "tall grass." The drive took an hour and it was totally worth it. The "tall grass" turned out to be a massive rice field in a gentle valley with safe cement walkways. Basically, it was a rice patty with well-marked and well maintained hiking trails. Every corner offered some specular view. This was so much better than yesterday's dangerous rice field. We took the shortest trail offered, which was a 1.5KM loop. The loop ended in a series of tourist-

friendly cafes. We liked the one with the picture menu outside. It also had a million dollar view from the inside (no walls in this place, just a canopy). Barb had rice. Jeff and I had the Balinese Pizza which had a super thin crust, a cream base, and toppings of ham, tomato, hard boiled eggs and bell peppers. It was very good. What was great though was the drink. I decided to try the "happy drink" based on the name alone. None of us could figure out what it was, so we asked. It was guava juice with a little bit of carbonated soda, condensed milk and simple sugar syrup.



The drive home was more than two hours long. The rain had stopped and everyone was out. I was surprised to see several elementary and middle school aged kids riding motorcycles, often two on a bike. And unlike the adults, they had no helmets.

It was so hard to get around once we got home; yesterday's trek had caught up with me and the Motrin I had taken this morning had worn off. I did my journal and we ate at the hotel rather than going out. They didn't have all the ingredients for the dish I wanted so I got a random chicken leg that was only OK. Everyone else's dish looked good. We got to bed early because tomorrow would be early. Our clothes were still not dry, even after hanging outside all day. Either the rain had swept in, a distinct possibility, or more likely, clothes don't dry in humid conditions.

Day 7, 6/21 – We got up at 1:30AM, ate breakfast from a box (banana sandwiches, hard boiled eggs, a candy bar and fruit), and met our driver at 2:30. It was pouring so we put our “drying” clothes back inside before we left. They were beginning to smell like mold. The driver assured us that it wasn’t raining at Batur, the volcano we were hiking today, and that it hadn’t rained there for two months.

The two hour drive was uneventful. Once we got there, we met our guide and started walking. At first, it wasn’t so bad, but then it started to get steep. I got more and more winded. 45 minutes into the hike, I couldn’t move any more. It was too steep. Fortunately (?) for me, there were motorcycle drivers available to get people to the top. My guide called for one and I got on. The ride was not comfortable and I still wound up walking a lot. The cycle could not handle steep inclines or sandy trails, which was about 50% of the trail. I had to walk these sections. I would get dropped off, hike up some cliff, meet my driver again, and be taken to the next steep and sandy surface. Eventually, we got to the end of the motorcycle trail, which was at the start of the last assault – a steep path of volcanic rock that was more climbed than walked. I took things really slow, moving only 30 feet or so at a time before taking a rest. The air was incredibly thin up here. About a quarter of the way up, this vendor lady who was also on her way up, offered to help drag me up a few sections. I was not too keen on this because at maybe 90 pounds, I didn’t think she could help much. And then the rain came down in buckets. I got out my umbrella. It didn’t help much because you can’t climb with an umbrella in one hand



while being dragged up some rocky surface by the other hand. At one point, the lady pulled me before I was ready to go and I did a big pancake on the rocks, taking her down with me and cutting my knee. I was now mud from head to toe. My favorite white Columbia travel shirt was ruined. Eventually, we got to the breakfast hut, which was wall-to-wall hikers, all trying to stay dry. My initial place was still in the rain. I moved more inside just as 20 or so more hikers arrived. We were packed in this place. Another group came next that included my family. I had only beaten them by 10 minutes! After maybe 30 minutes, the rain stopped and the sun began to rise. We got a breakfast that was really similar to the one we were given at 1:30 so I didn’t eat. I should have. My blood sugar was low and I wasn’t thinking straight. We went up to the caldera, looked at a steam vent, took many pictures and then began the trek back down. Barbara had on old sneakers that simply weren’t cutting it on this trail. My shoes were great on “earth” but not on slippery sections of volcanic rock so I had to be careful too. I had to jump over those surfaces, sometimes 5 feet down, so my knees were taking a beating. I was so thankful that the bus driver had lent me his walking stick. It was a real life-saver on the way down. If anything, going down was harder than going up. I was sweating so bad that I was



dripping all over my glasses and I had nothing to dry them with because I was a big muddy mess. My knees began to give out too, due to the 10-20% grades. Three girls decided to run down the hill past us. Two of them were wearing flats/flip-flops. One was falling out of her sports bra. She adjusted at a flat spot, but realized that she now had a blister. They walked after that, but still faster than us. Meanwhile, I felt like all the sugar in my body had been completely depleted. I managed to make it back to the van where I had a power bar waiting. We opted not to see the nearby city or temple, as we had planned, because we were all hot, wet and miserable. When we got back, we laundered today's clothes and added them to the still drying clothes. My white shirt was ruined. I slept a little then journaled. It began to pour again. After that, I spent some quality time with my Sci Fi novel while it rained even harder. I think Barb got three hours of sleep this afternoon. At 5:30, Jeff came down. He had discovered a highly rated Indonesian restaurant on the outskirts of town. We got a driver who, for once, spoke a lot of English, and headed out. This place was open-air under a grass hut roof. The food was top-notch. Our driver took us home and we set up breakfast early because we would be leaving early-ish tomorrow for another day of pain and suffering... or hiking as some call it.

Our clothes are not drying and they now smell like mold. Tomorrow, the hotel will launder our clothes properly.



Day 8, 6/22 – We had to get an early breakfast because our guide was picking us up at 8:30. Breakfast showed up at 8. We sent all our laundry out to get it washed AND DRIED. I was now wearing my only clean and dry outfit, which was the same outfit I was wearing yesterday after changing clothes. After a 1.5 hour drive, we arrived at a chocolate factory and resort that wouldn't look out of place in Hawaii. It was swanky. I thought that maybe we were in the wrong place but then our guide showed up. He was a local farmer who would guide us around his village. Our first stop was to a local temple. He made an offering at the edge of the cemetery just outside the temple. The cemetery belonged to the wife of Shiva (the wife, being the goddess of death and "bad people."). The temple itself is dedicated to the god

Shiva, the destroyer (nice family!). This is the only place where the two can meet. The wife, being death, is not allowed in the temple complex. There were some red plants in a row in two places. This is where the dead are buried. One section is for the working class caste and the other is for kings and priests caste. Bali has a two caste system. Every 3-5 years, they dig up all the bones of one of the castes and have a mass cremation. The ashes will get thrown into the sea. This saves cremation costs, which are in the 20M Rupiah range (\$500). After the death of a loved one, families visit the grave site three times during the week, offering the dead gifts of their favorite foods and smokes and then no more until the cremation ceremony. We also learned that there are different types of bamboo – green, yellow and brown. Green and brown are sturdy and used in construction. Yellow is useless and is only used in cremation ceremonies to build the pallet to be burned.





For the next couple of hours, we visited everyone in town it seemed (“town” being a collection of isolated compounds in the jungle connected by skinny mud paths). They were all related to our guide and to each other. We met a woman preparing boiled palm stalks for her pig. On the stove was the family’s meal for the day. We tried some. It was tasty. It consisted of some sort of sturdy zucchini-like vegetable with local spices like garlic, ginger, super-hot peppers, cloves and tamarind.

We went down some very slippery paths that the barefoot locals would navigate easily, even with heavy things on their heads, but we could not. We all took turns slipping. Jeff fell off a staircase and got caught by some shrubs, narrowly avoiding a 10 foot drop on to rocks below. I don’t know that those same shrubs would have caught me. At the bottom was a bathing and watering site where women would get water every day and bathe. Our guide said that he really liked watching the women bathe. It has only been in the last 10 years that plumbing has been installed in this village, saving the women all kinds of time. The field workers still clean up and drink water here, but the women now bathe at home. This stream that feeds this water hole also continually feeds

and fills the rice patty fields nearby.

All along our walk, our guide would have us smell stuff and taste stuff. We got to see ginger, nutmeg, tamarind, peppers, jackfruit, durian, breadfruit, pineapple, coffee, tapioca (which looks like pot), dragon fruit and cacao. The cacao tasted slimy and tart on the outside and bitter on the inside. The locals eat the slimy stuff and turn the seeds into chocolate. The breadfruit was tasty and not too sweet. There were some trees we looked at as well. One was akin to a maple where the sap is turned into syrup. The palm trees come in coconut and beetlenut varieties.



The biggest trees in the forest are balsa, both strong and light. We met his cows. As a Hindu, he keeps the cows and breeds them, but doesn’t milk them or eat them. They are used to plow the rice fields, but less and less these days because most of the farmers have

“Japanese cows,” or gas-powered tillers. The cows will eventually be sold to Muslims or Christians on the island who have no problem eating them. We walked through a traditional rice field, which took a lot of balance. We stopped at some mushrooms. Our guide said that they were magic mushrooms. When he was 12, a friend pulled a prank on him by slipping these mushrooms in his soup. He spent the next several hours in front of a mirror laughing as his face melted and then he woke up with a massive hangover. He also talked marriage: He has been married twice and has two children, though one died young. He said that most people get married twice: the first time by “MBA” (Married by Accident). This meant that a guy got some gal pregnant, which demands marriage in this society. 90% of Balinese get married this way. They then find love later, divorcing their MBA bride in the process. We passed by two beehives, one with normal bees and one with the tiniest bees on the planet, smaller than flies. The small bees don’t sting and they make “unsweet” honey. The two bee types are in competition and they attack each other’s nests but can sometimes cohabitate, as they were doing here. Because of this observation, there is a myth that says if you mix the two honeys and feed it to your first wife, she will like the second wife.



Next up, we met with a guy who threatened to cut our guide’s head off with a sickle, He says this every time, but they are good friends. The man’s wife was not far off, trimming banana leaves for market. They will be used on fancy food plates for tourists and as offering holders at temples, which are all over the place. This is one way this commune makes money. Another is by selling fruits at the market, though there is a lot of competition there, and of course selling their cows to non-Hindus for meat. Pigs are also sold, but mostly to each other to be eaten, so not much profit there. The Muslims won’t eat the pigs and the Christians prefer beef. Finally, we met more family members turning dirt over in a rice field with “fork” hoes. Our guide said that he was in the field yesterday doing this, but today, he had to give a tour.

Near the end of our hike, there was a fallen palm tree over a really deep ravine. Our guide asked us who wanted to cross first. I was thinking: “gee, all of us have slipped a couple of times and have shown no balancing ability so far, surely he’s not going to make us do this.” He was kidding – he just wanted to see the looks on our faces. There was an unseen path under the palm down the ravine and up the other side. He thought this was very funny, so he did this every trip. He said that once, a whole family of Japanese girls started to cry when told they would have to cross the palm, so now he calls this the crying spot.



When we got back to the swanky chocolate place, we were given ice-cold jasmine infused towels to freshen-up with and then we had a really good lunch with chocolate-based drinks. The appetizer was fried oysters with a chili sauce. My salad had an aioli vinaigrette dressing. The pasta Bolognese was good and the dessert was farm fruits with bread pudding. As we ate, I noticed how intentional everything was here: from the utensils and bowls to the placemats, salt & pepper shaker, even the music; it all had an island vibe and was obviously coordinated by a professional of some sort. This didn't happen by accident. We toured the chocolate factory next, but it was mostly about chocolate sales, so we left. Nice A/C though...



The ride back was long and slow. When we got to our hotel, we were told that our laundry would be back mid-day tomorrow. Of course, this wouldn't work because we'd be on a plane mid-day tomorrow, so we adjusted the time to tomorrow at 7:30AM. We setup breakfast for tomorrow because we were leaving early and we also setup a Balinese Massage for later this evening. For now, we got in a taxi and headed to tourist central near the monkey forest. We shopped. Jeff got a shirt and a baby Ganesha. Barb got a shirt and wooden utensils. I got a scary Hindu mask. We ate at a restaurant called "Oops." And oops, I did it again; I ordered something they couldn't make due to a lack of ingredients, so I got their vegetarian burrito. It was happy hour with 2-for-1 drinks so I ordered two gin & tonics. The gin sucked, but the limes were awesome. Adelle was playing non-stop in the background. My burrito contained local veggies with a pesto mayonnaise. It was delicious. The yam fries were the best I've ever had. The corn on the cob was not. We taxied home. I

wasn't going to get a massage, but Barbara insisted. We had only one masseuse. Barbara insisted that I go first. We were by the pool with a relaxing waterfall nearby and monkey sounds in the distance. The oil used was coconut with lemongrass. It got hot when moved around. The lady used up all her scented oil on me so Barbara got baby oil, which did not heat up, but still allowed for a great massage. This was a full-body massage. I was doing great until she got to my thighs and calves. They hurt so much from that volcano hike. The pain did eventually decrease and by the time she got to my neck and pecs, I think I fell asleep. Barbara did too when it was her turn.

Day 9, 6/23 – For once, the alarm woke me up. It was raining again. I mostly packed and then we went to breakfast. Laundry and food showed up at the same time. The laundry smelled good and it was dry. Yay! We ate, packed and left. The drive to the airport was almost two hours of chaos. Our driver was Bunk again. The think I like about him is that he can really drive. Throughout this Balinese excursion, I had observed how people drove. Everyone helps everyone out. There are clear rules that everyone follows. A left blinker means “I am about to turn left” or “I am yielding to you; please pass” depending on the context. A right signal means “I am turning right” or “I am passing you and I need to be in oncoming traffic for a while so get over as much as you can.” A hazard light means “I’m going straight through this intersection and I’m not turning.” Strangely, turn signals are not used when actually turning, drifting or merging. It’s just assumed that you will. You honk briefly before going around tight corners where there is no mirror present. Some blind corners have mirrors. The first car to a choke point (and there are many) has the right of way. Getting into a congested road from a side road is done one inch at a time until a large enough car is forced to stop because it can’t get past you. It all works! The only people I saw who almost got into accidents were young white people (Americans and Europeans). The only inconsiderate driver I saw on the road today was no doubt an American. The people of Bali have entirely bought into the notion of mutual help and mutual respect. Even their traffic habits show this.

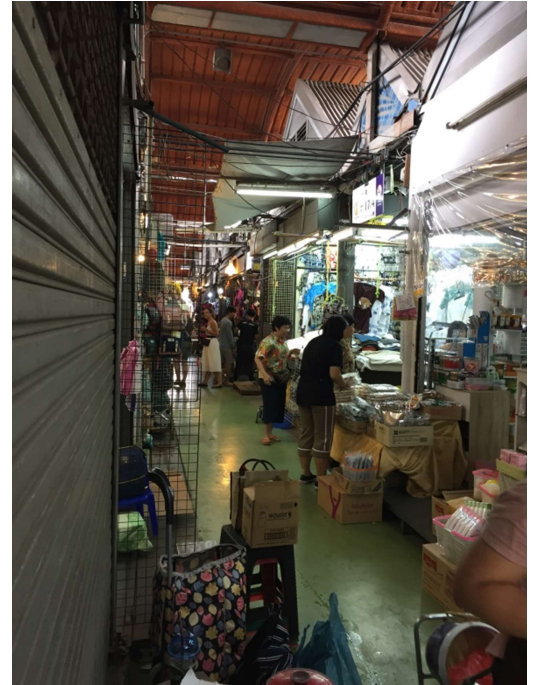


Getting through the airport was super easy. The hardest part was obtaining paper tickets, and it wasn’t that hard because we were considered “super premier” passengers on this flight due to the fact that I paid an extra \$3 to get emergency exit seats with 2” extra leg room. That super premier line was really short. On the other side of security was my Hard Rock Café where I got a shirt with the last of my Rupiah. Lunch on the plane smelled good, so we paid for lunch. It was both tasty and cheap and we could use Thai Baht to pay for it.



We opted to take a taxi to our hotel rather than the bus. The bus would have cost 150 THB, or \$5. The taxi cost 900THB + 120 in tolls, or \$45, but would get us directly to our hotel in a third of the time. This hotel has no elevator. It was supposed to, but it doesn’t work. Our room was on the 4th floor. The “suite” was a common area with a kitchenette, a bathroom and a bedroom. The bed was way too hard. At least TV offered World Cup Soccer. The Wi-Fi in this room was very spotty. We went to the nearby MacDonaldd’s for dinner. It was air-conditioned. No one spoke English, but they were very helpful. My cilantro chili beef was almost too spicy to eat. Jeff’s cilantro chili chicken was too spicy to eat. Even Barbara’s Korean chicken sandwich was spicy. Maybe we don’t go there again, or we order the more familiar burgers.

Day 10, 6/24 – I think we were dreading today because the forecast was for 93 degrees and potential rain. The breakfast buffet was good and offered Thai, Chinese and British selections, which suited the clientele of this establishment. Our goal today was to learn some of the transportation options we would be using this week. The walk to the water taxi wasn't far. We learned that one way is 9THB (.30¢) and that it was a lot of fun. Jeff and Barb really seemed to like it. The walk to the sky train took maybe 10 minutes. We learned that there is adequate info for anyone to succeed in learning the Skytrain system, but you need coins, not bills, to get a fare card. There are coin machines and a person at a counter who will exchange bills for coins, so everything is covered. You look at the map, see where you are going, and a Baht amount will be listed. Easy! We found our track. The train was nice and air-conditioned. The weekend market that we went to was just getting started when we arrived. This place was bigger than the San Jose flea market. Shopping was hot but fun. Barb spent a fair amount. I only got waters and a coffee. Part of the fun was having Courtney select a handbag she liked from half a world away.



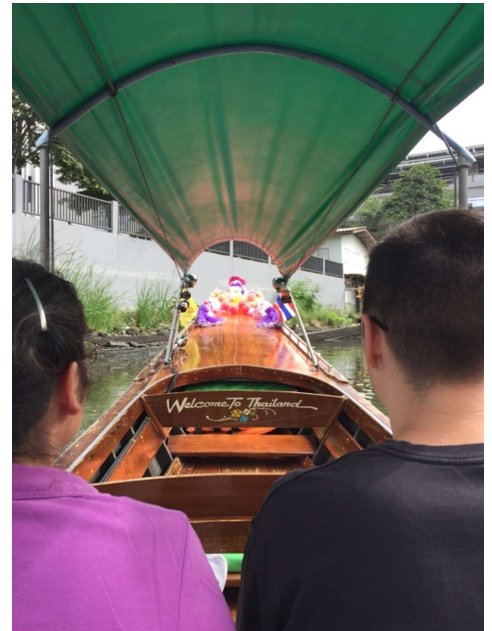
Technology is awesome! Eventually, we shopped ourselves out so we took the train back to the Siam Mall (where we had started) which was actually a series of interconnected malls. Though we weren't yet hungry, I wanted to show these two one of the highlights of the Siam Mall – its massive Mega Food Court with a high-end grocery store in the middle. There might have been 50 restaurants here in the basement. After doing a loop of the place, we went across the street to an indoor-outdoor mall that was essentially a big concrete box with "Escher" type ramps all over. This was the MBX mall. We went through the "box" and down the street to the Hard Rock Café where I got a shirt. After that, we went to the Paragon Mall to experience a movie in "4DX." The theaters were on the 7th floor. There were a lot of high-end cars on the 5th floor (how did they get there?). There was a Bentley place, a Porsche place, a Lamborghini place an Aston-Martin place and a Ferrari place. When we got to the theater, the only movie in 4DX was Incredibles 2. We didn't want to spend \$50 on that movie so we went to Starbucks on the same floor and stayed there for a very long time. (Starbucks not only offers coffee, but decent Wi-Fi and time away in something "American" and familiar. In Europe, I used to go to McDonalds to "breathe," but now there's Starbucks). We did eventually go to another mall, the "One



Mall." Our hotel person said that the cheapest clothes would be found in this mall, but this mall was completely dead! We went back to the massive food court and ate at a Thai restaurant. I had Lime Chicken with Cocoanut Rice (which inspired me to send a "Lime and Cocoanut" reference to my Thünderhüg band back home) along with a mango smoothie. All were excellent. Jeff showed us a button to use when we wanted service. No service will come in Asia, apparently, if you do not press that button. Hey, it worked too! We then walked through air-conditioned malls as much as possible to get to the street that would take us to the water taxi. This taxi had no ramp or stairs, so we had to jump over the gunnel before it took off. I was not so graceful this time and I bruised my thigh getting in the boat. In a few stops, we were back to our familiar road and back to hour hotel. A successful day! We were still full from lunch, so we ate some snack food we had with us and tried to get World Cup soccer. Either there was no game, or the TV wasn't showing it. We watched something about the Thai Royal family instead and a news brief on some kids trapped in a cave not far from here.

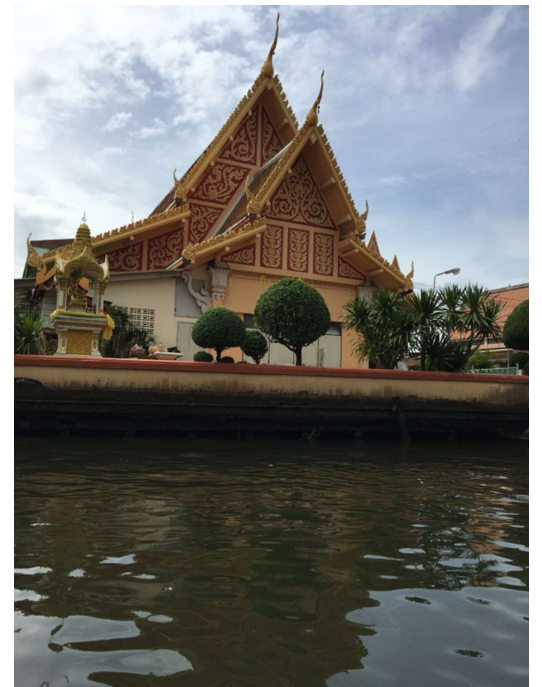
Day 11, 6/25 – Yay, it's our 30th wedding anniversary today! Much of our marriage has been a blur, and so was today. Today we would go on an all-day Chao Phraya river cruise to see how Bangkok looked 100 years ago. This is where the working class poor live and not where tourists tend to go. The all-day guided tour was recommended by Annie at work who has taken the tour twice (including 10 days ago) and is quite the Asia adventurer.

I got up early because my band was texting each other at 5:30AM my time. We possibly got a gig at a new winery! I had to get up at 6 anyway so this was not a big deal, plus my bed is too hard and it might be giving me a rash as well. We were at breakfast at 7 and out the door by 7:30. The receptionist recommended that we take the boat/Skytrain option to get to our meeting place by 8:30. A taxi or a tuk-tuk would not make it there in time. We were doing fine until we got to the train station. It was too crowded with morning commuters and we didn't get on the first train. The next train came 20 minutes later, so we wound up 20 minutes late to our destination. Fortunately, our guide, Nui, was there. She started things off with a map tour of Bangkok, showing how the recent progress around here had totally changed the river life of Bangkok. She likened it to letter-writing. Once email came along, no one writes a letter and waits 3 days anymore. Now, even Thai youth under 22 years old are considered tourists when they get on a river boat because it's totally foreign to them. Our first stop was to a "floating market,"

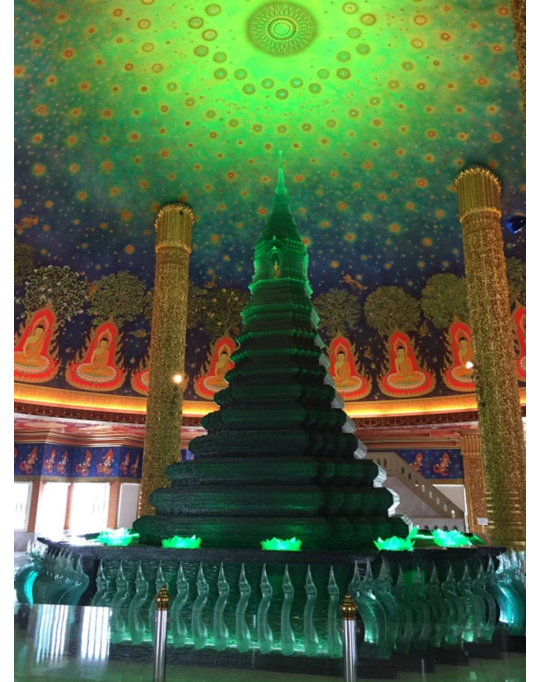


except that this market wasn't floating anymore because there is no longer any profit in being on a boat because people now arrive by car or motorcycle. They moved to the shore so the people could reach them. One lady was chopping up pineapple when we arrived. There were wasps all around the pineapple. Nui said that this is how the shopper knows the pineapple is sweet. You don't buy pineapple if there are no wasps. The wasps do not sting... typically. We tried a local doughnut, a small, sweet banana and some very fresh jackfruit. Our guide bought us a bag of both fruits (we weren't really into the fruit, but we politely accepted). At least she didn't buy us durian, which we also looked at and learned how to assess and buy. Stop 2 was to a "rich" monastery with a really big pagoda. Some temples simply have richer supporters and this was one of them.

The monks seemed to lack for nothing here. The pagoda itself was five floors tall. Each floor was more beautiful. After scolding some Chinese tourist for having shorts on (knees and shoulders must be covered in any temple in Thailand), Nui sat us down on the second floor, in front of a really big floor fan, to talk to us about this temple and some Buddhist practices. The first practice is to sit cross-legged, which I cannot do. Apparently, pointing the soles of your feet at anyone or at anything religious is seriously bad. I was allowed to point my foot only at my family. Nui talked for a very, very long time. I was in pain much of the time, not being used to sitting on stone floors. My favorite take-away was the need for monks to have these giant fan partition things in front of them when they chant to avoid looking around. If they saw their family or some hot 18-year-old, they might look around or screw-up a chant. Neither is allowed. Another take-away: All boys start in school



as monks. If you stay at the school after 7-years-old, you are then considered a novitiate monk. If you stay past 22, you're a monk. Schools used to only be monasteries, and only for boys. Then King Mongkut IV visited Europe and saw that women were also educated there so he came back and changed the system. School would still be on a monastery campus, but outside the monastery proper, allowing all kids to go to school. Well, Nui talked some more and then complained about how late we were and that we wouldn't have much time for photos or questions if we were to get back on schedule. I got the feeling that Nui considered her talks the most value-added part of the tour, so they were not to be cut short. The next few floors were very beautiful with the top floor being mostly made of green glass that resembled jade. Next stop was to a 135 year old house that had been used for years as a puppet show place and as an artist colony. I liked the vibe of this old wooden place. We saw how some of the poorest still lived. These were river folks who had lost their living because people stopped showing up and they had opted not to change with the times because they were true river folk. I can't really blame them, they seemed really tight with their community and they were happy. Next stop was to a "poor" temple. We would have gone to a different temple, but the water was more than a meter below average today so we couldn't reach some of the docks. Our boat was thin and really tipsy. I had a hard time getting on and off (we had this whole strategy on how to get on and off these boats and I was the key component because of my weight). Anyway, this working class temple is the kind of place I would like to explore. It's too bad Nui talked our ears off again at this temple. My back was starting to hurt from standing for so long. Her talk this time was about Buddhist philosophy. Barb was fascinated; Jeffrey and I were bored. I



didn't learn much that I didn't already know, as she confined herself to basic Buddhist tenants. Nui then took us several miles downriver to have lunch at some lady's house, which had been converted to a restaurant. Along the way, we spotted a snake in the water, three monitor lizards and some snail eggs, which looked like a wad of pink bubble gum. I also texted with my band during this time and showed them live pictures. It was almost like they were there with us. They were all at their respective homes drinking beer (they sent pictures). When we got to the restaurant, we ordered several dishes. I wanted a beer, I really like the Chang Beer here, but our guide doesn't drink, so no beer was offered. When the food came, we got a briefing on how the Thai eat. They use a spoon and a fork in this country, but they eat with the spoon and use the fork as a shovel to move food towards the spoon. You may use a fork to eat Pad Thai, or any other noodle dish, but that's it. I was told that we do not eat left-handed. I did anyway, being left-handed. The food was amazing and not at all spicy. The coconut milk, lemongrass, ginger and chicken soup was my favorite.

The last stop was to an orchid farm. I knew that Barb would love it. Nui posed us with the flowers for some artsy pictures. She was quite a photographer, but I was getting hot and tired and my back hurt. We took a long time to get back to where we had started. Nui asked us what we liked best and I liked the two temples and the artist house. The boat ride was fun too. I must admit though that there were a few things I could have missed, but on the whole, there's no way we could have seen all that we saw today without an expert guide. This was a culturally important day for us, and not a bad way to spend an anniversary.

We took our familiar route back to our hotel for some rest, making a stop at Starbucks along the way. Later, we went out to eat. We chose the most local restaurant we would find – a steak house. This place served super high-end steak from all over the world at market prices. We didn't want to spend that much, so I had the special – and Australian beef shish kabob (with a big beer). Jeff had a hamburger and Barb went with the chicken coconut, ginger, mushroom and lemongrass soup (there must be a shorter name for this dish – we see it everywhere). The soup alone was enough to feed us all. When my shish kabob came out 30 minutes after the other dishes, I was already pretty full. The steak was tender, but it was also dripping in a very sweet BBQ sauce. This is not a shish kabob! Just as I was finishing, Barb asked for a to-go bag for the soup. She instead got a to-go order of piping-hot soup in a bag. Jeff and I thought this was hilarious! Of course there would be no doggy bags in Thailand – you always eat all your food here without exception.



Day 12, 6/26 – Because we were to leave at 7, before breakfast, Jeff and I went to McDonalds for Egg McMuffin meals. These tasted normal. Barbara ate her soup from last night. When Jeff and I got back, our guide, Noc, was waiting for us. Actually, she had been in the lobby when we had left, but we didn't recognize her and she didn't say anything. The bus arrived just as Barb did from upstairs. Nice Van! It was really customized and fancy on the inside. Noc, by the way, was an independent tour guide who supported herself in Bangkok while her European husband finished school not far from where we were going today (about 70KM away). For the next two hours we drove through traffic, got way out of town and then stopped at a service station for coffee and a bathroom break. It was already hot and muggy out. Amazon Coffee (it's a chain of coffee shops like Starbucks) was good but sweet. All coffees around here seem to be sugared. We also tried some latkes. They were good and sweet. The driver had waters for us when we arrived back at the van. Another 20 minutes and we were there at the bridge on the River Kwai. We took our pictures then loaded up on liquids while waiting for the train. I bought a drink I didn't recognize; it tasted like wood. I liked it, but all this sugar was making me woozy.





We were one of maybe 10 white groups that got on the train with a Thai guide. The guides all knew each other and indeed everyone around the station knew them too. The train ride was exciting for everyone at first. The area is lovely and we had fun recognizing all kinds of plants and trees: banana, mango, papaya, corn, rice, bamboo and kasawa, which is used to make both tapioca and MSG. After a while, the same plants kept appearing, except for teak – that was new. Our guide told us that Thailand had nationalized all the teak trees because they were disappearing too fast. Now you had to have government permission to cut down a teak tree. Everyone settled down. After 1.5 hours, we got to the “danger spot” where so many lost their lives building a really complex and curved trestle bridge (and this wood bridge is still here today!). In all, some 15K British, Australian and Dutch, all grabbed from their colonies, lost their lives building this colossal railway from Singapore to Northern Burma for the Japanese during WWII. The River Kwai is just the famous bit we know about because its construction and demolition (and later, a bombing of the iron replacement bridge) were all well-documented. We got off at the “danger” site, took pictures and also looked at a Buddhist temple inside

a cave at the apex of that curved bridge. Across the river was a very fancy looking resort. We drove about 10 minutes to go ride some elephants. I got my own elephant. Barb and Jeff shared another. At one point, my elephant guide got off the elephant and stuck me on the elephant’s broad shoulders. It was tough to balance. I lost my umbrella. Meanwhile, the guide was taking a ton of photos and videos of me not falling. When I got back to the center, we mounted a search for my umbrella. Some other riders spotted it for me. Lunch was not too far away and again, the food was amazing. It turns out that Thai food is really good around here. Who knew? The last stop of the day was to the remembrance museum and grave site where 6.9K of the 15K dead were buried. The museum was very well put together and it offered free coffee. We wandered the graveyard for a bit, then headed home. The ride would be three hours long. The first hour was dead stop traffic. 10 miles ahead, there was an accident. It had started raining. We finally saw the accident – two smashed cars and a bus on its tail in a 10 foot deep ditch. After that, traffic mostly moved. We got to our hotel at 7PM. I paid Noc, who was our favorite tour guide so far, and then we all headed to Kao Shan Road by our hotel. This road is known for its food, its night life and its where all the hippie hikers hang out in their hostels. It was certainly a happening place. There was an acoustic player doing Queen songs at one club. He sucked. Jeff chose a pizza place. The pizza was good but the price was American. Still, they took credit cards, a rarity around here. The moment we stepped foot into our hotel room, it started to pour, accompanied by thunder and lightning. Talk about timing: those poor, wet backpackers.



Day 13, 6/27 – So, I just checked my phone app and we’ve been walking 9 miles a day every day so far, except for that one 7.5 mile day where we hiked up a freakin’ volcano. We found out on the news this morning that the volcano south of the one we hiked blew the day we left. Not much, mind you, but enough to stop all flights roughly an hour after we left.

Today would be an 11.2 mile walk-around-town day. After sending our laundry out (I was on my last outfit and day two on these socks) and after having a hearty breakfast, we began our walk to the Grand Palace. And just as some bloggers mentioned, some tuk-tuk drivers tried to tell us that the place was closed today so they could take us elsewhere. We blew right past those guys. When we got to the Grand Palace, we were put in a “holding pen” across the street from the entrance. With 15 minutes to spare, we were only the second group in line. One of the freelance guides for hire, desperately trying to latch on to a tourist group, told Jeff that he would never get in with shorts and that he’d have to buy some “Hammertime” pants nearby (what most people have been calling elephant pants because these loose pajama bottom sort of things mostly had an elephant pattern on them). Noc had told us the same thing yesterday. Jeff escaped the barrier and bought some pants for 100THB nearby. Inside the pen, it would have cost 200THB. These were pretty awesome looking black batik patterned pants. I was jealous. Nowhere in Thailand can I find a pair that fits me.



As we stood waiting, I began to sweat profusely for no particular reason. OK, maybe that power walk to the Palace in the sun had something to do with it. I was fine while moving because my specially-purposed Columbia shirt acts as an



A/C system, moving air around inside and pushing hot air out. It doesn’t work once you stop moving though, or surprisingly, when it’s overcast and muggy, as it is now. This shirt works better in hot, dry regions like Egypt. I saw some Chinese and Indian groups arrive. I predicted that they would try to get to the head of the line because this is what most tour groups attempt to do. I was not disappointed. The small German group in front of us (who are also “line people” like us Americans) stepped in front of them, and so did we. The groups continued to inch forward... and we too inched forward. In 10 minutes, we were all 15 feet forward of where we had been, but our two little groups were determined not to let these two large groups get ahead of us. At 8:30, we were looking for some cue to cross the street from a guard, but it was a couple of group members from each of the large groups that simply started crossing the street. It opened the floodgates. One Chinese couple was literally running to be first in line. We ran-walked and were maybe 10th in line by the time we got to the ticket booth. Once we got inside, every vantage point was picture worthy, so we took a ton of pictures before the place got too crowded. People kept asking Jeffrey to take their picture. My guess is that their



guidebooks all said to find some 20-something American because they know how to work a smart phone (just as our own sites routinely told us to ask for directions from 20-35 year old local women because they will be helpful and they will not have forgotten their High School English, plus, the men will be rude.). By the way, absolutely true on all accounts: it's just good practice to do this.

We eventually headed to the exit, having seen everything, only to discover that we had only seen the temple part of this complex. Just as Jeff was asking where the palace part of this

complex was, we found it. It was huge! We weren't allowed inside though, so we took a few pictures of the exterior and moved on. Just beyond the palace was a small and mostly useless

museum and armory right near the true exit. It was getting to be kind of gloomy out. The walk to our next stop, Wat Pho, was long because we first had to walk around the massive palace walls. I was sweating again. The reclining Buddha was really, really big and very impressive. We looked around the temple complex a bit more and it began to sprinkle. There was actually more to see than just the reclining Buddha. There was also a fresh water station for free water bottle fill-ups. How nice!

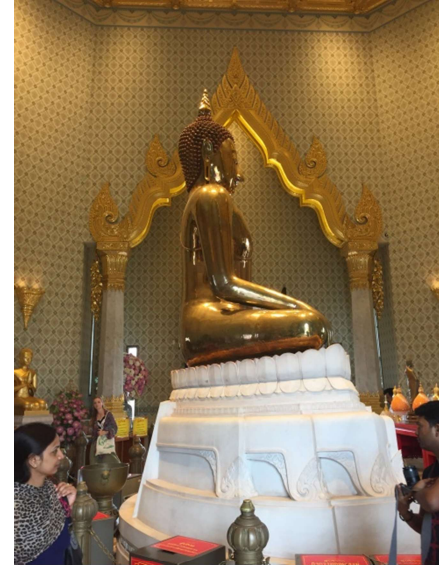




We walked to the docks after that to get to the temple of the dawn across the Chao Phraya River. There were actually two docks so we had to figure out which one we wanted. It was the one on the left through a bar/restaurant. The ride across was free. The temple had a really big Buddha and not much more. We took the boat back. We had to pay on the way back. To avoid a 2 mile walk to Chinatown for lunch, we took a tuk-tuk. This guy offered us a fair price, unlike some of the other guys near him (always know the average fare and always negotiate, so my source says). When we got to Chinatown, we saw a lot of gold exchanges and jewelry stores. Chinatown is home to a thriving gold market. The Thai people are really big on “portable currency” in the form of gold “Baht” chains (Indians too). Everyone around here owns a little gold.

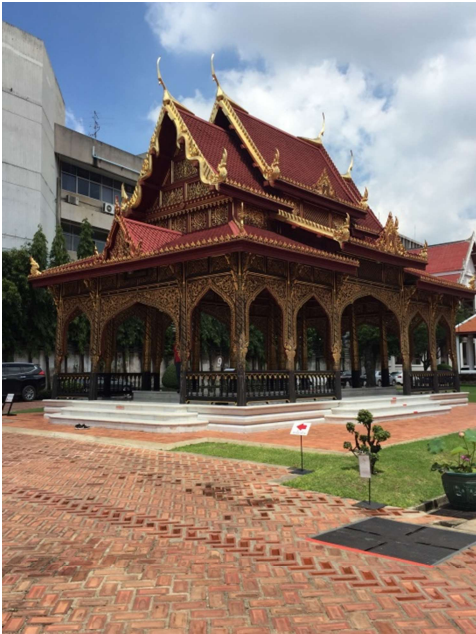
Jeff found a Starbucks. We made it a home base for a long time. As mentioned previously, you can't underestimate the power of a Starbucks

when travelling. It has better coffee, better chairs, often a bathroom, A/C, free Wi-Fi and it plays American music. What's not to love? Feeling refreshed, we went to the golden Buddha at the end of Chinatown. This solid gold Buddha happened to be five flights up a pagoda. When we got to the fifth floor, we had to take off our shoes, which was a little tricky because the ground was still wet in places from the rain. I was sweating again and my feet hurt. The gold Buddha was not the prettiest one I have ever seen. It had a big nose. We slowly made our way down and avoided getting run over by cars and tour busses all trying to park to see this Buddha. The restaurant I had chosen to eat at for lunch didn't open until 6PM, so we decided to walk a little over 2 miles to the MBK, a “different” kind of mall. It was like a very upscale flea market. Now 2PM, we were very hungry and looking for food options. There were a lot of options on every floor of this mall. We went to the food court on floor 6. We ate at a chicken place that had Japanese style fried food with a soy ginger sauce. It was very good, but as Barb and Jeff discovered, the portions were too big. I had the fish, which was a lighter, better choice. We got ice cream at another place, but then had to buy and put money on some stupid card to pay for it – what a racket! The place we had entered for the ice cream was where all the independent food guys operated. They



each had a stall and they had their own pay card system to guarantee that they wouldn't get ripped off. This stall arrangement reminded me of the hawker stands in Singapore. Anyway, I used the stupid card to pay for the ice cream, but I still had 55THB on the card AND it expired at midnight. What a rip-off system! With no other option than to buy stuff or throw away 55THB, Barb bought baked goods. Now completely stuffed, we walked over to the Jim Thompson house, a nice house with an American owner who mysteriously disappeared in 1967. This compound of traditional Thai teak houses was nice, as were his gardens and art collection. And again, we had to take our shoes off. With the tour done, we discovered a path along the river that would take us to our taxi stop. Along the way, a very nice lady talked to us. Her English skills were very good. Again, I slipped getting into the water taxi. That whole duck and dive routine doesn't work for me, so I tried to grab the awning railing and swing in. Nope. When we got back to our hotel, our clothes had been washed and mostly dried. I couldn't wait to shower and get into clean clothes. Jim Thompson's house was not clean

– I had brown footprints on the bottom of my socks from walking around without shoes.

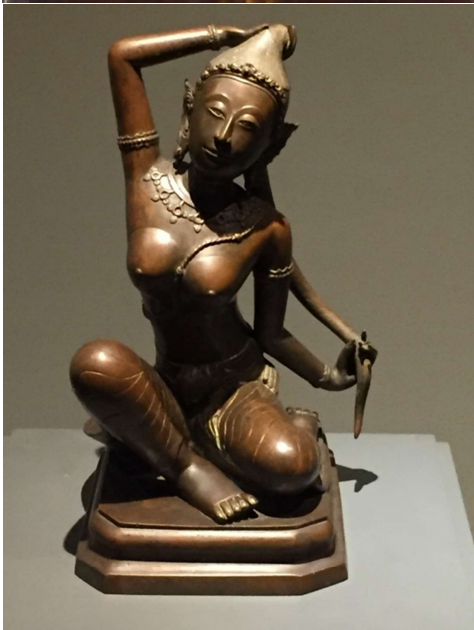


Day 14, 6/28 – Today was “live like a local” day, something I love doing whenever I can afford an extra day in a place. We had no schedule – a completely open day to do whatever we wanted to do. I wanted to see a museum. Barbara wanted to try street food satay, Jeff wanted to see a movie and eat in the big food court. This became our day. We walked to the National Museum first. At the ticket counter was a free tour guide who offered to show us around. Her name was Bronwyn and she was from Johannesburg. Her husband was a former footballer who now worked in the front office of the Bangkok football team. She had a love of Thailand so she studied for a year to become a docent. With us today also was another transplant from Colorado and Arizona who was a docent in training. She and her husband decided to retire here because it’s simply cheaper than America. About a third of the way through the tour, we gained yet another docent in training and her two children. Her husband was an international businessman out of Australia and they had been here for 18 years. I joked that we had

much of the British Empire represented here (I had discovered that Bronwyn was Welsh, not Dutch, so she was of the British Empire, not a Dutch Boer). She first told us about the history of Thailand. I’m going to get several things wrong, but I’ll summarize as best as I can: The original Thai people lived about 100KM to the north of Bangkok. They had a large, well-developed city. The Burmese kept attacking and 26 times, the Thai repelled them. Finally, on attempt 27, the Thai were defeated. Everything of value, including people and elephants, were taken away and the entire city was burned to the ground. If you go up north, you can still see the ruins today. Later, a general who had not been captured decided to rebuild, but further away from the Burmese. The previous city had been successful because it was an island in a confluence of three rivers. No pirate would go up river so the trading was safe. Bangkok had a big river bend, but no island so this general created a huge channel, turning Bangkok into an island. Next, he tried to recreate the old city by placing everything where it formerly was. Taking what he could from the old city, he created the Grand Palace and a Deputy Palace that would no doubt get attacked first if the Burmese ever came back. The remaining population was not thrilled about all the building going on, but they couldn’t do much to stop the general because he had the army on his side. Eventually, this general became Rama I. Later, Rama IV did away with the deputy position, which is why the National Museum is here today. The National Museum is the former Deputy Palace. All royal burials, in the form of cremation, takes place between the two palaces at what is today a very large park with a big racetrack oval. If the royal person was good, the ceremony goes clockwise around the track before the cremation in the center. If the person was executed or was bad in some way, the procession went counter-clockwise. By the way, the general, Rama I, suffered from what we call PTSD today, so once an heir was established (once his oldest son was old enough), Rama I was put in a velvet sack and clubbed to death.



In the next room, we learned a bit about the establishment of the king myth, and how it set up the religion of Thai Buddhism. To establish authority, it was said that the first king had been the human manifestation of Vishnu, one of the big three Hindu gods and the preserver of life. Vishnu has come to earth on occasion, according to the Hindu faith, in different forms for different reasons. One of those times, he came to earth as a man and his name was Rama. Buddha also was born from Vishnu, apparently, so there was another tie-in to the Rama mythology. The Thai were animists before they were Buddhists, where spirits inhabited rocks and trees and living creatures. When Hinduism showed up along the trade routes, the Thai people combined Hinduism and Animism. When Buddhism showed up, they added Animism and Hinduism to Buddhism, forming what we know today as Thai Buddhism. Thai Buddhism combines the best of all three faiths, but it is mostly Buddhist. And the kings, or Ramas, or the incarnations of Vishnu, figure in their religion as well. Their



king is still considered a god on earth even today.

The next room was a chapel (no monks, so this is not a temple), so a perfect place to learn about Buddhism: Siddhartha was immaculately conceived and born out of the side of his mother. Immediately, Sid took seven steps and Lotus flowers grew where he had stepped. Born a prince, the parents gave Sid everything and protected him. One day, there was a parade and the caretakers forgot to keep Sid in the shade. Much to everyone's amazement, the sun stood still so Sid could remain in the shade. At 16, Sid got married and in attendance was Brahma. Sid wanted to see the real world so he and a friend snuck out. While out, he saw a sick man, and old man and a dead man for the first time. He was sad. He decided to leave his family and kids and go live in the world. He cut off his que and left with five friends. He found a wise man, learned from him and then decided to seek enlightenment by sitting under a Bodhi tree. An evil spirit named Mara knew that Gautama (Sid's name change



now that he was a poor monk) was close, so he tried to distract him with his beautiful daughters. When that failed, they became hags, and joined a demon army that surrounded Gautama. Gautama was even told that he was not significant enough to become "the enlightened one" (Buddha) and that he had no witness anyway so even if he had achieved enlightenment, no one would believe him. Gautama touched the earth and a water spirit came out of the ground as a witness. She had the holy water essence of all the good things Sid/Gautama had done in all his past lives. She wrung the water out of her long hair and the resulting flood wiped-out the whole demon army.

So... Bronwyn told us all of this so we would understand the hand positions of the various Buddhas we were looking at. If Buddha has two hands in his lap, it shows the part of the story where he is seeking enlightenment. If one hand is going down, this is the "can I get a witness" part of the story where the army gets wiped-out through flood. It is more officially called "Buddha subduing Mara." If Buddha is lying down, that is yet another story: Buddha was at a



meal and a friend had accidentally brought poisoned food. Buddha warned his guests not to eat the food, but he ate to be a good guest. He died and achieved Nirvana. This death is also represented in the stupas, which are formed to show (the now deceased) Buddha's robe at the bottom, his overturned rice and begging bowl in the middle and his staff at the top.

Next, we learned about the different Buddha styles (thin face – Thai, chubby face – Hmong, square jaw – Cambodian), and about a special type of Buddha: Buddha lifted up by a seven headed snake. The story goes that there was a monsoon and Buddha was so entranced that he didn't notice the rising water. A water snake saw this, got under Buddha, jacked him up and covered his head because he would otherwise have drowned. This water snake, or Naga, is seen today at the entrance of every Thai temple either as a snake along the railing of stairs going up to the temple, or as the colored "monkey" looking guards at the entrance. They protect the temple from the ground. Up on the roof, there are these bird-like structures. They are Garuda (or Makaras), sky guardians who happen to hate Nagas, but between the two of them, they have the temple guarded from top to bottom. A Garuda can also look like one of those Naga monkeys, but with wings.). As to all the shiny glass and metal on the outside of the temple, that is to frighten the bad spirits away. The theory goes that they see their own reflection, get freaked-out, and run away.



We got to see the big gold funeral chariot (recently used) that carts the kings' and queens' urn to the funeral pyre. The last king and queen did coffins instead, breaking with ancient tradition. Still, to hold with tradition, their hair and fingernails were put in the urns and burned, while their caskets with their bodies were nearby. This seemed to satisfy everyone. The chariot weighs several tons and is pulled by 169 men.

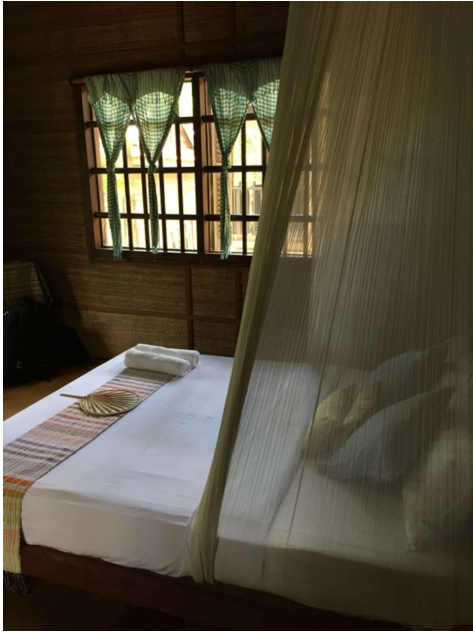
After the tour was over, we looked around some more then went across town to the food court for lunch. After that, we went upstairs to the Paragon One Theater. As we made our journey to the mall, Barbara tried to find street food satay. Most was gone, but she did find one vendor by the river taxi that served a fatty chicken variety, but it didn't come with the satay peanut sauce and the pieces were mostly fat. Barbara was very disappointed. Lunch was Indian food which made everyone happy. For our movie, we watched Jurassic World (in English!). Man, what a beautiful theater. The US has nothing like it! Even the bathrooms are spectacular. One thing we learned, quickly, is that prior to the start of the movie, there are images of the king up on the screen. Being that he is a god on earth and all, everyone in the theater is required to stand, sort of like what we do with the national anthem.



For the first time, we walked home in darkness. The mall was brimming over with teens and the place was all aglow. It was so beautiful! Our water taxi was completely full. We set up a taxi for tomorrow's early ride to the airport.

Day 15, 6/29 – The taxi ride was a breeze (though I think he didn't take the toll roads sometimes even though we had paid for it). Alas, I had developed a case of traveler's diarrhea overnight. Even after two Imodium, I was going to the bathroom all day. The airplane ride was the hardest because the flight never really leveled off so the bathroom was never available because we couldn't get out of our seats.

Gee, I had forgotten that this hotel picked up its guests. We were headed for a taxi when Jeff spotted my name on a held up sign by the exit.



Our initial impressions of Cambodia are impressive. The people are poor but happy. The driver was trying to line up jobs with us the whole way to our hotel, but didn't understand enough English for us to successfully tell him that we had already booked everything long ago. Our Cambodian hut on stilts smelled of mold and was hotter than blazes when we first arrived. Jeffrey had his own hut and his A/C worked fine. Ours did not. We decided to go to a landmine



museum Jeffrey had read about. It was way out of town. The Obamas, Hillary Clinton and Leon Panetta have all been there. Quite by accident, we wound up with the same driver. Just outside of our spa, which happened to be quite a

distance from civilization, dirt-rutted roads and all, our driver told us that we were in a killing field. The whole stretch of rice patty fields we saw until we got to a real road was where hundreds if not thousands had been killed by the Khmer Rouge. Wow, what a start to our trek! The roads were not great. An election was happening soon, so we saw all kinds of candidate posters up. The one most often seen was a blue poster with two old men on it. The land mine museum was now run by an ex-military guy from Los Angeles. He was a great source of information about landmines, and about who attacked who and when in any given area. The Vietnam-Cambodian war was more complex than I had realized. Johnson was already secretly bombing Cambodia in 1965 and this did not stop until 1973. The problem was, the Russians had trawlers off the coast who tracked our ships and spies imbedded in all the Air Forces bases in both Thailand and in Guam so the Viet Kong always knew when we were about to bomb something. They simply went underground and waited until after the bombing. This is why the Ho Chi Minh Trail was never bombed out of existence (though we sure tried!). Also, the Khmer Rouge guys would show up after an American bombing and tell the locals that their government had supported the bombing. The Khmer



Rouge flourished as a result. After Vietnam became communist, the communists began to attack the Khmer Rouge and almost pushed them into Thailand. The Viet Kong were now the most fearsome and experienced army in the region and they were backed by the USSR, not the Chinese. The Chinese attacked Vietnam in 1979 and got their butts kicked. During the official part of our involvement in the Vietnam War, the US lost 58.3K people. The Chinese lost 30K in a month fighting the Viet Kong in 1979. Everything died down after that, but there was a whole lot of unexploded ordinance left behind. It will take around 100 years to remove all of it. Oh ya, we are one of the three countries not to sign the “no landmines” treaty, due to our involvement with South Korea who uses land mines to keep the North Koreans out, but we stopped making and using land mines in 1993. Obama wanted to sign the treaty but couldn’t get the backing of congress.



The driver took us back a different way. It was boring compared to the way we had come up, where we had seen cows being carted by motorbikes, a nice temple, a nice lake, the nice Buddhist memorial temple on the edge of the killing field. When we got to the hotel at 4pm, we were starving so we had a very late lunch. It was good, but I was not in a good mood; but my butt hurt from diarrhea, and I was miffed that our driver “didn’t have change” for the large bills that I had, giving him too large a tip, and he was still pitching trips all the way home. The guy won’t take no for an answer!

We knew that we would eventually be hungry again, and we wanted to try authentic Khmer food, but that required two hours advanced notice, so we setup dinner for 8PM. Barb went on a hammock for a while; I wrote in my not-so-air-conditioned hut. Barb came back and took a

nap
once
the
room
was
cool
enough.

Dinner was pretty good. Our “spa” has many of the trappings of a real spa, and all our food came out of a very ornate door at the edge of this wonderful bamboo canopy that served as a reception area, pool hall and dining facility, but I also couldn’t help but notice that between our hut and the dining hall was the actual kitchen which was outdoors, used fire wood and woks, and was at the edge of the jungle. Tomorrow is going to be early at 4AM, so we set up an early breakfast and went to bed early. We wrapped our bed in mosquito netting and hoped that the room would get cool enough to sleep in.



Day 16, 6/30 – Well that was a cool experience – I’ve never slept under mosquito netting before. I awoke thinking that I was hearing someone’s alarm from a nearby hut, except that it was mine. I didn’t have time to fully prepare for my morning because I had to be out front in 20 minutes. For once, Barbara beat me out the door. I grabbed appropriate things to wear, all the US cash I had on me (which they prefer in Cambodia, I understand) and darted out the door... and got lost. Man, it’s really dark around here. I finally found the kitchen, which led me to the reception area. Everyone was waiting for me and I was 3 minutes late. Barbara noticed that the kitchen staff was literally camped in the reception hall in hammocks and tents. They were probably there so they could prepare our breakfast boxes before we headed out. We had to go to a government building to get temple day passes first, and then we were off to the pre-dawn Angkor Wat experience.



That experience included about 200 other travelers with cameras all fighting for position in front of a murky pond to get the ultimate sunrise photo.

I took hundreds of pictures (no joke!), but honestly, the first one I took was probably the best. We had breakfast after that. Our hotel had packed a nice breakfast and we added coffee to it at the restaurant that our tour guide, Veasna An, parked us at. Soon, we drove to the “Tomb Raider” temple to see what a jungle can do to a place over time (Answer: ruin it, basically). Because the Banyan trees were seen in the movie, Americans expect to see them when they get here, so the temple preservers keep them at this temple even though they would rather remove them. The Banyan trees “walk” over the temple and destroy it over time. In Siem Reap, there are over 300 temples, but the jungle has claimed them all so one-by-one, they have to deforest the temples and rebuild them. Oh ya, we saw parrots flying around and singing. So far, about 100 temples have been reclaimed and restored. The older temples are Hindu, since Hinduism came here first. The later temples are Buddhist, and some earlier Hindu temples were converted to Buddhism. It also depended on the religion of the reigning king as to what type of temple got built. You can sort of tell if a temple is Hindu or Buddhist by the height of the wall. Buddhists have short walls and Hindus like tall walls.





As we drove, we asked why we were seeing nothing but Lexus SUVs everywhere. Veasna told us that Cambodia is a huge after-market place for American Lexus SUVs. Cambodians especially want ones from California because they are never in snow, so the bodies stay intact. Apparently, when a Lexus is traded in, it is usually shipped straight to Asia.

The next temple was called the Lady Temple because of all the female images. Never mind that the temple was created to honor a wise male guru. This was an altogether different temple because the stone was red and this stone held its shape much better. All the carvings still looked fresh and it didn't appear that moss stuck to this type of stone, unlike the previous temple. Moss also destroys stone. Our third temple looked like it might belong to Brahma because of all the four faced statues (49 of them at the temple, plus another at each of the four entrance gates), but no, these represent the four aspects of Buddha. I'm pretty sure I've seen these giant heads of Angkor Thom in a movie (yes, in the same Tomb Raiders movie, which actually used every temple



we're going to today to shoot a five minute segment of the film. Angelina Jolie and the rest had to shoot the film quickly because the Khmer Rouge was still a thing, even though they were supposed to have died off in 1979 [they lasted until 2005], and they were in potential danger the whole time they were in Cambodia in 2001. Angelina liked Cambodia so much that she adopted a kid from here.). Anyway, again, it was impressive and this one had towers we could climb, so we did. It was now getting really hot out so we sought shade wherever we could. When we got back to the car, we were always greeted with fresh cold water bottles and a lemongrass infused frozen towel.

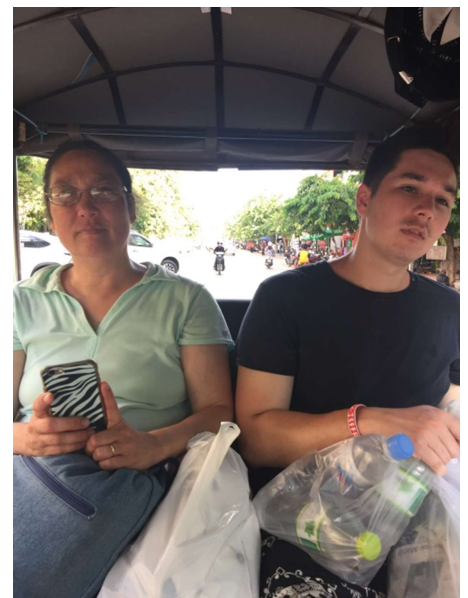
We opted not to go to our breakfast spot for lunch near Angkor Wat, but instead head straight to Angkor Wat (again), this time to climb around. This temple, on the flag of Cambodia and on the label of the National Beer, had many floors, but the climb to the towers looked like a foreshortened version of a Mayan temple. Fortunately, there were modern steps in the back. Unfortunately, the angle was about the same (almost vertical), just with a



handrail. The climb in the heat was exhausting but worth it for the views. On the way back, we looked at a carved storyboard about Rama on a very tall wall (in direct sunlight – I’m melting!) and then walked for one last time across that stupid temporary floating bridge (which had too much bounce in it. Each trek made you hot and tired, and we crossed that thing four times today!). The end of our tour included lunch at probably the best Khmer restaurant in town. We tried all the recommended dishes and all of them were excellent. I had spring rolls with fish sauce, a ginger salad, and meat & veggie shish kabobs. The skewers were stalks of lemongrass. Barb’s



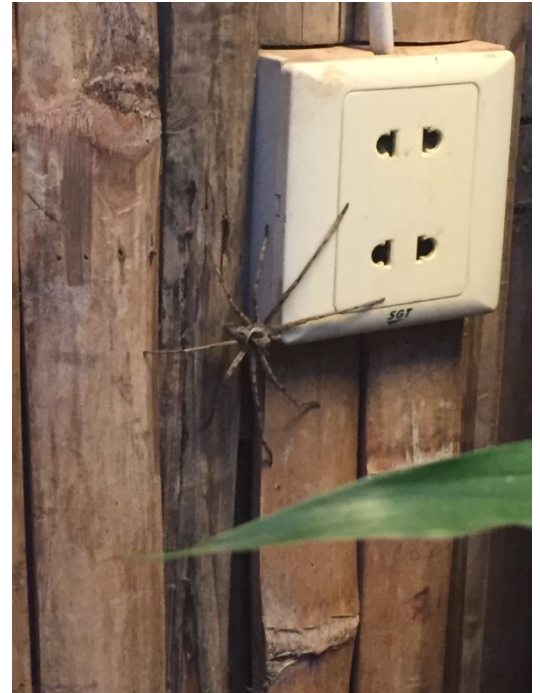
ginger rice was great, as was my fresh mint smoothie. When lunch was done, Veasna and our driver were kind enough to drive us to the center of Siem Reap to the Hard Rock Café, and that is where we parted ways. The lady in the store was super nice. We shopped after my shirt purchase along the main road in this surprisingly small city. Jeff bought an unvarnished version of the 4 aspects of Buddha from Angkor Thom. It was made of a very dense and heavy wood that is seen all around here. He talked the lady down from \$40 to \$30. I walked across the aisle and found a nicer black lacquer version made of a lighter wood. This gal started the bidding at \$30 and I talked her down to \$20. Barbara bought shirts and scarves. As we went in search of coffee down “Pub Street,” tuk-tuks kept asking us if we wanted a ride. We had our coffee with dessert than grabbed one of those tuk-tuks back to the hotel. Along the way, Barb became fascinated by the gas sold in old soda bottles at almost every store. There weren’t many gas stations around – this is how you got gas here. We tried to take a picture of these bottles while zipping down the road. I don’t know that we were that successful. Anyway, once we got back to the hotel hut, Barb and I kept taking turns under the shower while we waited for our room to cool down. I also had massive hemorrhoids from yesterday’s traveler’s tummy, so I had bought ointment on Pub Street and I now put it on liberally. It felt good. Barb and I went through our photos then I wrote in this journal. Who knows if we’ll eat dinner; we’re all pretty full from lunch.



Day 17, 7/1 – So, some things I’ve learned: both Hindus and Buddhists worship “members” for fertility; the bud on top of a Buddha’s head is not a top knot, but excess wisdom that popped out of his head after giving his first sermon – a sermon that was so good that the five friends who had abandoned him because his first converts, along with several woodland creatures, which is why you’ll often see a “looking up” lamb along with the “wheel,” another component of his sermon; Columbia brand “A/C” shirts only work in sunshine; you should not have a Buddha tattoo or put a statue in a random place other than a shrine or temple – it’s considered offensive; Cambodians only buy used Lexuses from California; Cambodia is stable as of 2010, but few know this and the place lives and dies on tourism which has mostly been generated by a few movies (Tomb Raiders – old and new, Indiana Jones, Two Brothers and a HK love story), and not by any tourist board; there are quite a few expats here because everything here is cheap, the groundwater is good and healthcare is both good and cheap; finally, anything in Cambodia that starts with the word “happy” on a menu contains pot.

My day started with walking into a spider web that popped up across the bathroom doorway overnight. The spider that made it was both huge and capable of jumping great distances. The thing must have jumped six feet to get away from me.

Breakfast was good. So was the ride to the airport. I think the hotel realized that I was not a fan of their normal driver, so we got a better and more expensive driver to take us to the airport, which I was fine with; things went much more smoothly. Check-in and passport control was super easy. I really like this airport; it’s so laid-back. There was a Starbucks outside, a Costas inside and a Hard Rock store. I was joking with Jeff that we would never have to leave the airport. Jeff said: “I know, there’s a picture of Angkor Wat over there!” The souvenirs were really good quality here as well and you could get them shipped. I was so tempted to buy a snakeskin djembe.



Our first flight to Bangkok went fine, but we spent two hours in immigration and we missed our connecting flight by about 10 minutes. The immigration counters simply didn’t have enough people and a whole bunch of planes had shown up at the same time. Our plane had parked at the very end of the terminal and we had to walk a mile to get to immigration. We got to talk to a nice Australian guy who was a budding muay Thai fighter and adventurer. The guy was 6’4” and full of mussels. He had a Thai wife whom he was visiting and he was having more lessons with his muay Thai master. He was working on getting his wife to Australia legally, and if that didn’t work out, he’d move to Thailand.

We got a slightly later flight and had to pay \$60 more for the privilege. This is a problem with setting up flights using a discount card like the All Asean Pass: domestic and international legs of a flight are not connected so you have to exit and re-enter the airport and sometimes go to a different terminal, as we had to today. Had we booked a normal flight, we would have skipped immigration. Still, we’re flying all over Asia for \$550 per person thanks to the pass, which ain’t bad.