

# ASIA DIARIES



by

**Kevin Murray**

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### Background

**1975:**

Bali

Java

Singapore

Malaysia

Thailand

**1990:**

Singapore, Malaysia, Thailand Revisited

**1994:**

Bali Revisited

**2000:**

Vietnam

## **Background**

At the age of 24, having spent most of my life in the protective embrace of home, school, University, then school again (as a teacher), I decided it was time to cast aside the security of familiarity and to experience the wider world. I decided, like many Australians before me, to wend my way overland towards Europe. I had little money and even less of a plan, but in March 1975 I boarded a plane for Bali... with my worldly belongings barely stretching the sides of my backpack, but with a stomach full of butterflies and a head full of expectation.

I left with two others of similar age but, I was to soon discover, very different expectations. One was a close friend that I had met in University. His name was Chris. The other was unknown to me before we left, but was an acquaintance of Chris. Somewhat confusingly, she too was called Chris.

I also carried with me a sketch pad and pencil, planning to try my hand at a few sketches while "away". Having never drawn much beyond a stick figure before, I wasn't sure of the outcome. I am still not sure. Nevertheless I have used a few of them to illustrate relevant bits of the narrative.

I didn't make it to Europe... in fact I only got as far as northern Thailand, but my mind had traveled much further than my body... in those 13 weeks away from home I learned a lot about the world, and a lot about myself.

I wrote this Diary as both a record of this journey and as a report of my adventures to be sent home in weekly batches (via Air Mail) to my girlfriend, Glenys, who was tasked with the job of forwarding them on to anyone else who might be interested - which mainly turned out to be my Mum. Now, several decades later, I look back on this Diary as revealing a time, a place and a person that no longer exists, yet the lessons learned on that journey have no doubt contributed greatly in shaping who I became...

Appended to this seminal 1975 Travel Diary are extracts from the diaries of three later trips...

The first, in 1990, was to Egypt, Singapore, Malaysia and Thailand with Glenys, who was by that time my wife, and our friend Stephanie. Since this journal is about my travels in South East Asia, I have omitted the record of our time in Egypt.

The second is a record of a trip Glenys and I made to Bali, in 1994, nearly 20 years since I was first there.

The third is a trip we did with three friends to Vietnam, in 2000.

Enjoy.

## Bali

### **Day 1: Sat 15/3/75**

Departure day. The plane actually landed, departed and landed almost on time - quite a feat for Garuda, I'm told! To see me off (9 o'clock) were Ken, Bruce, Swiss, Mrs Butt, Klaus, Heather, Peter and last (but by no means least) Glenny. My apprehension about my proposed journey was nothing compared with the uncertainty of how the inevitable changes that will occur in the ensuing months will affect my feelings and attitudes to you all - especially you-know-who. I sincerely hope it deepens them rather than lessens them!

Meanwhile, back at the aeroplane... (damn impersonal departures - can't see a thing through those bloody windows). The six hour trip passed quickly - we were either being fed or were sleeping or reading most of the way. Extensive cloud cover prevented consistent observation, but we did glimpse areas of city, mountains, the Western slopes, DESERT (lots of) and coast (luckily). Also saw lots of wing!

Arrived in Den Passar at 12:10 pm. Like stepping into a humid oven... bloody hot, in fact. Took the usual hour or so for formalities (actually very INformal indeed!) and then had our first taste of Indonesian travel... got a ride in a bemo from the airport to Kuta.



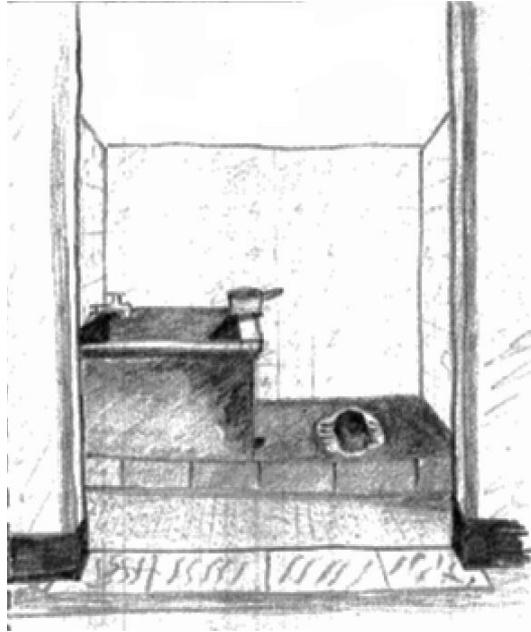
A bemo is a very small Daihatsu truck with seats along the side, driven by a tiny 2-stroke engine. Into this matchbox toy were squeezed (without complaint) NINE local adults, the three of us (with packs) and more than EIGHT children. The 5 mile trip cost us 8c each. The trip itself was extremely hairy - once the whole contraption had built up speed the driver naturally wished not to slow down again, so hand on horn he would scream down the single-lane roads, bikes, people, chooks, pigs notwithstanding - only stopping to pick up yet MORE passengers! There appear to be NO road rules here - it doesn't even seem to matter which side of the road you drive on.

After unfurling ourselves from the bemo we were descended upon by a motley conglomeration of local children offering accommodation. Each of

course vociferously announced as vastly superior to all previous offers. Chris, however, had already organised for us to stay at Losmen Ratna. One of the assembled multitude offered to show us the way, so off we went on a torturous route which ended finally at (you guessed it) HIS losmen. After much nodding of heads and denial of his consistent pleadings we were eventually shown to our desired abode. It is the most unlikely structure you could ever find, consisting of 5 square concrete and wicker rooms - bright blue and red doors and windows on a background of dirty yellow - set in the middle of what was undoubtedly the owners fowl run. We find ourselves surrounded by appallingly filthy houses with open sewers and stagnant water, yet our rooms are quite well kept - 2 hard mattresses, a table and a verandah. The family we are staying with seem very friendly but speak very little English. The price is certainly right - 60c per night with breakfast (2 bananas and a hot boiled lemon drink). Our fellow "inn-mates" are: 2 Aussie guys, a Canadian, a New Zealander and 2 Pommie girls. All have been here more than 10 days so are very useful providers of information.

The beach is nearby but exceptionally filthy - unfortunately the plastic bag has been adopted as a replacement to the banana leaf yet is not proving to be as biodegradable! All sewerage, etc, flows straight into the ocean - but the surf is good and the water is warm - and skinny dipping is the done thing!

Fortunately we arrived in the middle of the Balinese New Year. Yesterday no-one was allowed outside their house for fear of a fine. NO-ONE COULD MOVE! Today was celebration day - open air markets, cock fights, ice cream, tourists, motor bikes... all contributing to the confusing cacophony of celebration. We, of course, were more than a little bewildered by it all. We tried out our bargaining techniques (you win some, you lose some!) Then back to our losmen for a crap - well I think I'll hold on some more - you should see the toilet facilities (sorry, facility, singular). The proverbial hole in the floor, that's all! Out to a restaurant for a 40c meal and back to a blissful sleep.



## **Day 2: Sun 16/3/75**

Great sleep - woke up 7 o'clock to the sound of heavy tropical rain - stopping as quickly as it started. "Room service" breakfast (2 bananas and hot lemon drink) then off to the beach for an early swim - so warm and inviting, real heaven. Then off to Kuta restaurant (Lasi) for brunch (black rice and banana pudding 10c, French toast 20c, fruit salad (large) 10c), sitting in majestic natural surroundings, refreshed by the cool sea breeze, sated by the highly imaginative preparation and presentation of food. I wonder what the poor rich people are doing.

Two hours absorbing Balinese food, scenery and peace then off to Kuta markets - fantastic. Oops I forgot the "mini-market" we experienced at our losman just after breakfast... the locals had obviously heard that "newcomers" were here and a veritable swarm of men and women selling their wares descended upon our tranquility. Everything from rings, bangles, paintings and carvings to sarongs, embroidered shirts and fine batik. All delivered to our verandah, mostly balanced on top of the women's heads - a feat that would make our shopping trolleys look half empty and cumbersome. They carry 40lb loads with such grace and apparent joviality that the occasional Western-style hand-held basket looks so awkward and out of place. The bargaining that goes on ("very cheap, what your price? Morning-price for you, special last price... this price good for you, no good for me..) has to be experienced to be believed. Nothing like our "civilized" business principles (not much!).

Meanwhile back at the market...again no such thing as a fixed price - bargaining is the done thing here! The amount of emotion spilled over a few cents is incredible but the humour that is ever present makes the whole rigmarole a grand social occasion.

Too hot to be out so back to Ratna for necessary "siesta". Again to the beach for daily wash (a shower was never this enjoyable). While swimming, my glasses were stolen from inside my towel.. no-one else's stuff was touched - just my glasses - incredible! Much consternation re whether to ring home for a new pair or to try Den Passar for some - conclude that Den Passar is best bet... a real drag tho' cause must wait for tomorrow. Can't see much so no Ballet tonight - instead a beaut smorgasbord tea (all you can eat for 40c) and back to bed.

### **Day 3: Mon 17/3/75**

Another great sleep.. the temperature is just perfect at night. An early start and into Den Pasar by bemo. This city (1.5 Million people) has just got to be seen to be believed! The noise, smell, traffic and the incredible crowds of people hit you like a wall as soon as step off the bemo. You just have to stand still for half an hour to absorb it all - even then it's impossible. The traffic is nothing short of dangerous - the little bemos and motorbikes seem like accidents looking for somewhere to happen - and they certainly do happen - tho' not as often as you would expect. The traffic rules seem to be extracted straight from Darwin's principles of Natural Selection - namely survival of the fittest. The bemo rides through town remind you of a roller coaster and the ghost train all rolled into one but the seating arrangements are as if inside a cement mixer - at full speed!

Took another bemo to the hospital for prescription for new glasses. A place with more people than bricks. The smell was unbelievable - urine, sweat, vomit, you name it. The corridors were full of it. People crammed shoulder to shoulder, all waiting patiently for treatment, some more dead than alive but all without a complaint or whinge. This seems to be the story everywhere here. The WOT ME WORRY caption should appear below every picture of Balinese people. My white skin and manner enabled me to "queue jump" but not in our sense of the word. The people were very pleased that I had thought fit to go to their hospital for treatment. I had difficulty communicating but, dictionary in hand I managed to have a very professional eye examination. Luckily the chart was in English, they even tested me for colour blindness, (trying to impress I think). Impress me they did. The nurses and doctors all seemed so happy and willing to help - not only me but all others too. From the hospital we made our way to the opticians in town - ordered gold rimmed, photo-grey lenses for \$30A. Very cheap indeed. Would pay at least \$80 in Sydney. They will be ready on Wednesday. What a relief. I've had headaches ever since yesterday and I'm dying to do some sketches but I can't see a bloody thing.

Quick trip to P.O. then out to Sanur and the splendidly grotesque and anachronistic Bali Beach Hotel. So incredibly different and opposite to the rest of island life. Crammed with American businessmen, who see Bali through their \$60 a day hotel room windows. There seemed to be the twinkling of an economic Law here: Balinese happiness decreases as tourist expenditure increases. Those poor buggers performing their once spontaneous dances every day at 1.30 and 4.30 before an audience of totally uninvolved, impersonal and disinterested cameras made me feel that perhaps it would have been better if the West had never discovered this paradise at all. Anyway, saw some beautiful carvings at Sanur, might even buy one! Bludged

shower, etc at Hotel, then back to Kuta. Another cheap delicious meal then...  
to bed, to bed.

#### **Day 4: Tues 18/3/75**

A great day. Arose early. Christopher went into Den Passar with N.Z. guy, Steve. Chris and I decided to have a "lazy day" on the beach. But first we went to look at another losman. We're all feeling a little discontented with Ratna, especially the lack of cleanliness of the toilet area. We found a good one, so Christine will move in today and Chris and I tomorrow. (We'll have to be diplomatic because everyone knows everyone else on this island and it certainly doesn't pay to make enemies).

Met a US Peace Corps teacher (Mike) and had a long, very interesting talk. He teaches English in Thailand so is a worthwhile contact. The Peace Corps appears to be similar to our Aust Volunteers Abroad idea. Chris and I then walked all around the area - finding new places, meeting new people, then ended up on the beach for a much needed and appreciated swim. I got a little burned but my tan is now strong enough to tolerate it. Every few minutes on the beach you are approached by women and girls selling sarongs, bikinis, cold drinks, hats, and just about anything else if you are foolish enough to ask. They carry most of it on their heads and rarely seem to go for a swim (if ever), even though they are on the beach all day peddling their wares - perhaps only selling enough to make 4-6c. What a hard life it seems to me, but they not only appear to tolerate it, they appear to enjoy their lives more than the average \$20,000 a year businessman in Sydney. A real eye-opener into the attitudes of people we might arrogantly refer to as "primitive".

The afternoon found us with full stomachs (the food is so good, plentiful and cheap) making a thorough and leisurely comparative examination of the many shops in the markets around Kuta. Christine bought a beautiful solid silver neck pendant and chain (\$3) which was (we were told) a symbol of OM - a mantra - ie, a word without meaning used for meditation in the Hindu culture. Another swim and then to yet another restaurant for tea where we discovered real, fresh milk. This is unusual because Hindus aren't allowed to use their many cows apart from pulling their antique looking plows... this restaurant was apparently Muslim. There are many things worth sketching but without my glasses this is still not possible. The strength and stability of family life, the attitude to "work", the non-violent Balinese nature, and the stylistic rituals and dances of the Balinese people are things that I am just now forming concepts about. I mention them now only to remind me to comment on them later when I have experienced more...

Another perfect day in this idyllic paradise...

### **Day 5: Wed 19/3/75**

Awoke early - fantastic swim with Christine. The surf was just perfect. Back to Ratna for breakfast and a further attempt at waking Chris (boy, can he sleep!). Then by bemo into Den Passar. It was not nearly as bad as Monday morning - or perhaps we had just become more accustomed to it - or perhaps Mondays really are hectic here. Either way, we all felt more at ease today. At 10 o'clock I picked up my glasses and rejoiced at being able to see again - a wonderful sense of relief! The glasses are excellent and not as dark as my previous pair (Chris tells me I look a little older now). With this new gift of clear vision I returned once more to absorb the sights of Den Passar. The main street shops are little different from their Manly Corso equivalents, but wander into any of the many side streets and you find the real essence of Asian economics... The food market, for example, is enough to turn you off food forever (not really). The way animals are treated really contrasts with the way we pamper our pets at home. It's not uncommon to see 12 live chooks, legs broken and tied together, slung over the petrol tank of a raucous motorcycle, observing with seeming bewilderment their final moments of life. In hundreds of cages I saw the futile territorial dominance displays and fights amongst chooks that had not the faintest idea that they were all soon to be considered equal to the tastebuds of some Balinese family!

Traffic screeches to a halt to let a filthy old pregnant pig, teats dragging on the even filthier ground, sway aimlessly across the road. There seemed to be more protein in the blowflies on any one piece of meat than in the meat itself! This meat section was the pits... exposed to the sun, those bits that weren't dry, hard and black were crawling with flies, while the old lady at the counter ate her lunch, pausing frequently to spit with great force OVER the meat. Most times she missed the meat!

Being a Hindu island, (the last in Indonesia) the only animal they do not kill for food is the cow. They use their cows as 1)lawn mowers, 2)status symbols, and 3)plow pullers (a primitive looking implement, but obviously very effective). Having done this latter job for centuries, the cows seem to need no coaxing or instruction, but pull the plow with seemingly resigned boredom.

At the markets I made friends with a guy named Pakwatha. He's half Indian and half Balinese. He spoke English much better than I spoke Balinese. He was 4 years into a Law course in Den Passar. Said he would visit me and wanted me to go to his house "sometime" (a delightfully vague Balinese turn of phrase). He was very interesting to talk to and although his brother owned the shop, he didn't try to sell me anything! I will certainly try to see him some more.

With heads dizzy with the experiences of Den Passar we headed back to Kuta and (now being able to see) hired two motorbikes for a week (\$13 each) with the intention of traveling to different parts of the island each day. I had to give Chris a quick lesson in bike riding. We had grilled fish (ah... protein) then when the others went to bed I decided to utilise my new-found mobility and eyesight... so back into Den Passar. The town appeared to be lit mainly by kero lanterns, by the light of which I was approached by half a dozen men selling women, girls, boys, whatever ("special price for European"). One even offered me his sister. I attempted a long-awaited sketch, but was hassled by so many people that I gave it a miss and headed for home.

I was soon glad of this decision, for half way home I stopped at a local hall and experienced a taste of the real Bali... a Ramayana ballet in its authentic setting. I appeared to be the only white person amid hundreds of locals... all craning their necks to catch a glimpse of the action. I was welcomed heartily and taken near to the stage. The mood of the people was highly infectious and I quickly found myself absorbed into this beautiful world of mysterious mime and rhythm. I was transported into another world where make-believe is a way of life and the stories are simple and unchanging - The King of the Monkeys (a goodie) saves the Princess (good) from the evil King of the Dragons with the help of the Garuda (good) and all live happily ever after... and they sure do! All of the instruments were percussive (xylophone-like) except for one flute. Many of the 20 or so musicians appeared to be in a trance. They played for over an hour and a half without (to my ears) an error... and not a written note of music in sight! Many were young boys. The music has remained unchanged for hundreds of years. Quite an experience.

You know when the end has come when they play a particular tune and everyone runs for the door - reminding me of sand grains forcing their way through the constriction in an hourglass. Everyone eventually gets through with a minimum of fuss... so different to Australian crowds which often frightened me. Crowds here are not only not frightening, they are actually reassuring. Privacy here is something you possess within you, you don't own or buy privacy; you can do many things in full view yet without fear or embarrassment because there is a real feeling that everyone is in the same boat - there are so many truly "equal" people that ANYTHING you do, you know that someone has done just the same before - and everyone knows - so who cares? My fight-or-flight distance has become somewhat diminished since to these peaceful, very physical people closeness means little more than friendship. Little Kutuk, the 10 year old boy at our losmen, is a good example of this. He is extremely friendly to me - I'm attempting to teach him some English (and he, me, Indonesian) and map reading, etc, (and also what pegs are!), and he is always touching me, rubbing, patting, etc, as do all close friends. Men hold hands and embrace as do the women. Babies are cuddled constantly by all the family - not just the mother. Truly this is *H. sapiens* in an

uninhibited state... and from my touch-deprived perspective, a good thing it is too!

## **Day 6: Thu 20/3/75**

Early morning swim with Christopher - magnificent surf, improving every day. Observed the open selling of pot on the beach. It is illegal here but you'd never know it. It seem that nearly everyone smokes it, sniffs it, injects it or swallows it (ie, not just dope either). Then we had another bike riding lesson - Christopher learns quickly and merely needs experience. Then lunch, and off to Ulu Watu. This is a temple on the southernmost tip of the island. Perched on a 300ft limestone cliff surrounded by reefs which from that height impart the most beautiful hues to the tropical waters. You can see fish, turtles, coral, etc, as if they were depicted in an abstract painting. It is so wonderful that anyone with any sort of feeling for artistry inside them could not help but be inspired by the beauty of Bali. Everywhere you look you see inspiration of one sort or another - even the cowbells (on every cow) remind me of the music on my Dad's Tahitian record... they are carved from wood and emit a dull, hollow sound, each different from the others and each with its own "rhythm" - quite exciting!

Ulu Watu is a Hindu temple built some 400 - 500 years ago. You must wear a sash to enter. Inside are dozens of sacred macaques. The males are very aggressive (as Chris found out as one decided to alter the shape of his T-shirt!). Dotted along the road are villages, the poorest we've seen as yet, pitiful people once proud, reduced to selling pitiful shell necklaces to the occasional tourist. On the way we got caught in a rainstorm with two Frenchmen, a Japanese and a German in a house with a Balinese family. Each of us could speak only his own language. This experience accentuated the great difficulties created by the "language barrier". Each of us no doubt had many things to say - each could learn much from the other but we were forcibly restricted to "pleasantries". Even with dictionary and phrase book in hand it was difficult to find out what you wanted to know - except to appreciate what a hard life the Balinese family has. But they're still smiling. There was a kaolin quarry on the way where the bulldozers, trucks and cranes seemed anachronistic beside the women carrying overfull baskets on their heads. One wonders whether "progress" has really been made when you observe the scar on the once beautiful countryside, ripped open by noisy, smelly mechanical monsters. The trucks also make the roads hairy to say the least - only wide enough for one truck - everything else in the way goes bush! Back home for another swim (to wash the rain off - we really got soaked) then tea and bed. Barong dance cancelled due to unfavourable weather. It pissed down rain!



## **Day 7: Fri 21/3/75**

What a day - the trip has really BEGUN! After much letter writing and waiting for the two Chrises buggerising around, we went into Den Pasar to mail letters and change more money. Then (11 o'clock) headed north to Ubud. The scenery along the way was fantastic. Rice paddies, villages, rivers, gorges, more rice paddies and mountains. Much greener than anything in Australia.

At Ubud we lunched in elegance at a hotel called Tjumpuan - magnificent place - well worth the inflated prices just to see how well a fairly large and complex structure can fit into its surroundings. Not just "fit in", but accentuate and amplify its natural beauty. It was set on the side of a deep river gully, really green and quite cool and moist and quietly inspirational. We then made our way homewards through the many villages stopping at the temples, art shops, market places, etc - no rush!

At one village (Peliatan) we visited a deserted temple which provided us the chance to experience life as it was P.T. (Pre-Tourist). You could stand in the courtyard and imagine the celebrations, festivals, preparations, dances and initiations taking place before your very eyes. Then you found yourself alone surrounded by lifeless stone carvings, each with a tale to tell, each unable to ever tell it. The moss is everywhere - obscuring the harshness of curves and ridges in the stonework, creating a mellowness and smoothness that virtually reeks with tranquility - I could drink from this cup often!

At another temple we found dozens of people preparing things for a Balinese cremation ceremony. We befriended a guy who could speak some English and he told us of the ceremony. There are three major parts to it: 1) burial in cemetery, 2) exhumation of body and cremation, and 3) purification... scattering of ashes onto the sea. Evidently 5 months ago the village chief died and was buried. Since then preparations have been underway by the whole village (financed by family - \$6,000 - "too much" they said!) for the cremation. Offerings have been presented - gold, silver, food, clothing, batik, silk, etc. A glitteringly colourful tower has been built, the sarcophagus prepared and the platform which is carried by the whole village is constructed. We saw all this ourselves as we were invited into the dead man's house by his son who spoke broken English and told us what it all meant... "Sad times for family, happy time for rest". We were invited to attend the feasting on Saturday night and the cremation on Sunday - we'll be there! The people are pleased to talk to us because: 1) we are sincerely interested in finding out about their customs, 2) we are teachers (revered in Bali!) and 3) we all make attempts at speaking their language (attempts which are all too inferior, tho' I fear!) and they certainly do appreciate that! They also like us to correct them on their English efforts.

We stopped off at a wood carver's house in Mas where a very intelligent, helpful and congenial guy showed us around explaining all the stories connected with each carving - each piece seems to have its own story, mostly an extract from one of the many dances - always moralistic and good versus bad - always Man in HARMONY with nature not opposed to it. The many paintings and carvings we saw at the Ubud museum illustrated this harmony. Their paintings seem reminiscent of Middle Ages art: no perspective, everything fitted into the painting on top of one another - rivers flowing through pictures - each has a story - usually "read" from left to right like a cartoon - time and space condensed into two dimensions. Anyway the carving guy showed us around the back of the shop where the carvers were painstakingly producing their work. No patterns, just straight from the head, each has a limited range (eg Shiva riding on Garuda standing on a turtle (world) tied up in a serpent (evil)). He explained the 4 "directions" of the world (NSEW) and how the 4-headed statue in the middle of Den Pasar protects all the traffic (is four heads enough?) and how each of three directions is represented by the three aspects of their god - Vishnu, Brama and Shiva. Also how there are three kinds of statues - decorative, God-representative and Guardian. He also explained how a Balinese house is usually set up (NSEW), where and why people sleep in special places, where and why special ceremonies are held, the three kinds of temple (Public, Professional and Family), etc. Such useful information for those of us trying to fathom this alien culture. There is too much detail to present here, but I tried to absorb as much as I could. In Bali you can tell if a true friendship is forming if they don't try to sell you anything. He didn't!

Left him in great spirits. Got caught in a HEAVY rainstorm and sought shelter at another place in Celuk. Met the most beautiful family and talked via dictionary and phrase book well into the night... many new things learnt about them and about Bali. One girl (Wirati), 20yrs old (looked 16) was the most beautiful I've seen, when she screwed up her nose and laughed (which she did most of the time) she virtually radiated happiness. She and her cousin (Dasini) spoke very little English so we "traded" languages between us, quite an experience. They fed us "Bali Brum" (rice wine) and we stayed for tea (ie dinner, Balinese style). Unbelievable! We all enjoyed the warmth and friendship that surrounded us that night. Dasini and Wirati and their cousin (Nowman) have promised to write, in English, to me and I to them. We saw family albums, had Balinese customs explained, also many other things of interest. Everyone was sad to leave but later visits were promised all around so off we went in the rain (soaking wet outside but warm and dry inside!). What a wonderful day!!!

## **Day 8: Sat 22/3/75**

We've been here a week already. It certainly has gone quickly - too quickly in fact. Ironically, however I feel I've been here much longer. It is much easier to adjust from the complex lifestyle to the simple lifestyle than it is to go the other way. This most definitely is a simpler lifestyle. The adults tell, believe, and live the stories that in their childhood were told to them by their parents. Most stories are of Hindu origin but there is a curious mixture of Buddhism as well, giving a religion known as "Hindu Balinese". There is none of the awesomeness attached to their religion (culture) than one finds in Christianity. It is simple, childlike and remarkably festive. Every event (birth, marriage, initiation, tooth filing, death, etc) is marked by a celebration. The colour, vibrant vivacity and fairytale beliefs of these people are more than adequately displayed in their art. No two paintings or sculpture are the same yet each tells much the same story and all styles (bar one we saw today) are similar. Christine and I today went to the most beautifully serene temple on the island, Tanah-Lot (Earth-Sea). This occupies all of a small tidal island and is dedicated to Vishnu, the god of the sea. There is a cave containing "guardian" snakes (real ones) on the shore. Nearby was an artist colony where the work they do really seems inspired. One of them (whose style reminded me of Miro's marvelously vibrant colour combination depicting everyday scenes in a whirling montage of brilliantly simple figures and objects) was dwarfed, had stumps for legs and arms and had all fingers and toes joined together. He was, however, a truly happy man - a fact which literally shone through his paintings.

We then drove home via Tabanan through many little river villages. The roads were disgusting but (because of this, maybe) these places were relatively untouched by tourism and the people seemed more "natural" and friendly than at any other place we've yet seen. I'll now qualify this... By "more natural" I mean less inhibited, less guilt-ridden, less easily embarrassed and, most importantly (but less easily explained) is the effect they give of "blending in" with their environment. You see a bird doing what comes naturally, or a cow or a dog or a pig. Likewise, you see H. sapiens and are struck not by how different he is to the other animals (as is stressed by OUR religion/culture) but by how similar and harmonious he is with nature. Some of the older Balinese even look more like "pre-men" than men. I most certainly don't mean anything derogatory by that - in fact, if to be a man-like is to be as we in the West have become, then saying that someone is more "animal-like" is actually highly complimentary!

There were minor differences of opinion between the Chrisses and myself tonight, reflecting differences in our basic philosophies again... I wish now to really "get into it" - to experience things that in Australia are impossible to experience - and I might never pass this way again. So surfing, sunning and

relaxing are OK, but I can easily do that in Australia so I wish not to waste too much of my valuable time doing these things here. They think otherwise so it looks like we may split up for a week or so. I'll go "bush" (up to the North and the mountains) while they stay on Kuta beach lapping up the same sun that shines on Yamba, Dee Why or Harbord! No hassles, just an amicable agreement. I'm glad it's this way 'cause we then don't become dependent on one another.

### **Day 9: Sun 23/3/75**

Again the weather's crook (funny about that - it turned sour just when we'd hired the bikes for a week!) but the sun struggled through long enough to spread warmth over the festivities. Yes, we attended an experience of a lifetime - the cremation at Ubud. But first we saw silver jewellery being made by hand - the painstaking effort that goes into this process is unbelievable. The patience exhibited by these people leaves "Western man" for dead. I bought a beautiful piece of jewellery for Glenny - pure silver, taking two weeks to make, I am told. A most intricate piece of work.

THEN... to Ubud for the cremation. We got there about 10 o'clock but little appeared to be happening so we filled in the time at a nearby monkey forest - very interesting and tame but they were very protective of their young and their territory. As we made our way back through the mud, you could feel the tension rising as the "time" drew near. The most obvious structure is a tower of three tiers (earth, air, heaven) mounted on an extremely strong platform of bamboo logs, each 4 - 5 inches in diameter. The ornateness and colour of this structure was striking as it stood there, glittering in the tropical sun... gold, tinsel, flags, incense, gifts, cloth, wings of cotton wool died a myriad of colours... all joined with the natural artistry of the villagers into a tower that proved fitting to house the spirit of the dead man (an artist) in the next highest stage of his life. Behind this tower was the sarcophagus - an enormous bright orange bull with huge horns, a fearsome expression and a voluminous mane. This also was mounted on a platform of bamboo.



These two structures were followed by a motley group which was the percussion band - who suddenly struck up the most incredible rhythms. People began dancing, yelling, laughing, swaying and moving more or less in the same direction. Busloads of tourists and locals began arriving - swelling the population of the little town to 3 or 4 times its size. Thousands came to

participate or watch. The whole procession began to move in a definite direction now. Tower first, swaying all over the road as 50 or 60 men struggled under its weight - appearing to pull it in every direction at once - the net result, however, being a somewhat erratic forward motion. Most of the carriers seemed to be well under the influence of drugs (or perhaps the event itself was intoxicating enough). Either way, everyone seemed to be thoroughly enjoying themselves.

Then came the Bull, in a similar state of drunkenness. Then the band with its trance-like rhythms. The procession wound its erratic way through what was by now a sea of humanity. Every now and then, the procession would stop to be sprayed with water and mud hurled by the raucous crowd. Most of the carriers were now in a frenzied state of excitement and their efforts at synchronising their labours grew less and less organised! They even managed to wipe out one or two electricity poles on their way. Apparently the erratic trajectory is deliberately designed to trick evil spirits who for some reason are only able to travel in straight lines! Eventually the whole improbable conglomeration reached the cemetery. The tower and the Bull were removed from their platforms. The Bull was placed under the cover of a huge thatched roof. The back of the hollow Bull was then split open and in the blink of an eye a group of frenzied men rushed over to where I was standing and began scratching at the earth. It suddenly dawned on me that they were going to dig up the body then and there! This they rapidly managed to do - and I was downwind! Here he was, 5 months dead and they just dug him up like that, rushed him over to the Bull, unwrapped him and placed him gently inside. Then came the long procession of women bearing offerings for him to take with him to heaven - plants, food, cloth, drinks, etc. Each present was blessed with "holy water" and placed carefully on top of the body by the only person in the entire assemblage that looked the remotest bit solemn. Still the band played on, drowning out the chanting women. The imminent threat of rain appeared to speed things up - both the tower and the Bull were soon well alight, sending volumes of smoke heavenwards. And then it was all over... What a way to go! The band and the people headed home, leaving behind the family to collect the ashes which will later be purified by being thrown into the sea.

A hairy ride home over really rugged roads, a scrumptious feed and a walk along the beach with Christine in the lingering sunset capped off a remarkable day. I couldn't help but wonder why Christian burials or cremations are not as joyous as the one I just witnessed... after all we are supposedly going to a much better place - aren't we?

## **Day 10: Mon 24/3/75**

Ten days already!

After the excitement of yesterday, today seemed to go very slowly. Firstly, Christine and I rode in to Den Pasar to post and receive some letters. Then to Sanur where we lazed in the luxury of the Bali Beach hotel to write some more letters. Then back to Kuta via Benoa to see the multitude of yachts from around the world. One of them wanted a crew to assist in taking a yacht to Singapore - I was sorely tempted. We passed a village built on mud... literally. Small piles of mud supporting the corners of each flimsy hut. Talk about a precarious way of life! Some good food and a necessary swim (today was the first fine day for 5 days) then I lay on the beach until after sunset... and what a sunset it was! The tropical sun seems to linger on the horizon, not wanting to leave such a beautiful place, displaying its own radiant beauty in an attempt to show that it is worthy of staying a little longer. But if there is one concept that the Balinese understand fully, it is INEVITABILITY, and the sun must inevitably give way to an equally spectacular tropical night sky. Many more northern stars are visible here, of course, and they're much more brilliant than when seen through city smog. I stayed to watch Venus join the sun in their nightly slumber and it was then time for the Barong dance in town.

Being "privileged" whites, we got to sit in the front of an open air rectangular area of cleared earth (the stage) with a primitive sort of stage entrance off to one side. The story of the dance was set out in a rough sort of "program" which was so involved that I got lost after the first paragraph. But if the program was hard to follow, the dance itself was like a sort of play, with many sub-plots, complications and involvements, with several humorous sections which, being in Balinese prevented us from enjoying the joke! Probably because of such language difficulties, the first half seemed to move slowly. The audience bore little resemblance to theatregoers in Sydney... There were dogs, kids, noise, smoke, talking, pushing... in general they were quite "irreverent". Perhaps they'd all seen it hundreds of times before. Towards the end of the inevitable battle scene 4 or 5 men came rushing in waving their "Kris" daggers. They were in a trance induced by smoking and staring at the image of the Barong for 5 hours beforehand. They were truly "possessed" - spasming, shaking, pupils dilated, sweating profusely. They began to turn their daggers on themselves, pressing the sharp tips into their faces and chests. Some were even trying to hit the daggers in with hammers! No blood, however, was drawn but there were 20 or so men there to restrain them whenever they got too overexcited. Then the dance just suddenly ended and everyone just as suddenly disappeared, leaving the few of us "Europeans" staring in bewilderment at an empty stage. It was really a frightening experience to see those men totally "out of their minds" (literally), truly believing that they were soldiers of the Barong sent to kill the evil witch.

They were not acting, they were living their roles. They were oblivious to virtually everything else around them. The Barong itself was magnificent... two men in a highly elaborate and stylised lion costume. The movements were such as to make even those of us not on drugs believe that it was real!

## **Day 11: Tue 26/3/75**

A day spent mostly by myself. I took off on the bike alone, the others being too sore and tired to travel any further by bike. I headed off early up the eastern side of the island through Gianyar, Klungkung and on up to Amplura. The scenery on this part of the island is very different. The mountains seem to be pushed straight up out of the sea. The sand is fine but as black as night. the threat of rain is constant, the soil rich and fertile, and the river gorges steep and very, very deep. On the occasional plain or valley floor the rice paddies occupy every possible spot, and every cliff that is not precisely vertical is terraced. I don't know how anyone could climb to these places, let alone cultivate them! Rice in its various stages of growth is coloured a particular shade of green, depending on its stage and being more or less non-seasonal, many stages are present at any one time... resulting in a magnificent display of subtle green-hued patchwork. Very impressive when viewed from the mountain tops.

The bridges spanning the deep gorges are almost unbelievable... one lane (just!) and maintained just enough to be passable. Safety seems to be of secondary importance to the Balinese. Some bridges are covered with metal sheets which make the most incongruous clatter which shatters the peace of the countryside for miles around. I attempted several sketches (getting slowly better). The people that gathered to see what I was doing (I counted 27 at one stage) could speak neither Indonesian nor English, so we tried to communicate via charades. I never before have fully realised the drawbacks of being unable to communicate verbally. These people no doubt have so much to tell me (and I to tell them) but we find ourselves limited to the barest of communication. Learn their language you say?.. 1) Bali is such a small part of the world. There are so many more languages. Do I learn them all? 2) Balinese is basically an unwritten language, and 3) it is very difficult to learn. I saw a most interesting temple (Goa Lawah) with a cave full of nesting starlings in the cliff behind it. The noise from them was constant and they are considered sacred.

I eventually returned home with a sore bum and back. It's a mighty long way on those bloody crook roads. I managed, however, to get to see the Ramayana ballet (by myself, again). It was unforgettable. A much more professional job than last night's effort. The "program" this time was easier to follow - there were no spoken words. It was extremely well acted, costumed, accompanied and presented. Every muscle in the dancers' bodies seems to be used in the non-stop dancing that accentuates every small movement. I found myself reminded of the symbolic displays of courting and aggression often seen in the animal world... in fact, that is what the whole play was about, fighting and loving! The grace and beauty of the actors and actresses has been described by greater writers than me, and even they don't do it justice, so

why should I try? It is, however, etched in my mind... suffice it to say that I was extremely impressed!

## **Day 12: Wed 26/3/75**

A very pleasant day spent mainly with Christine touring around nearby areas. Very hot, so down for an early morning swim, breakfast, then once more into Den Pasar - Chris went to the Post Office while I went to the Museum... a fascinating place. I was shown around by a friend whom I had met earlier - Putu. He is a 3rd Year Law student in Den Pasar. He speaks English very well. I was astonished at the antiquity of much Balinese culture - many of the tilling and eating implements were early Neolithic! Many of the complexities of the Balinese calendar were also kindly revealed to me, though I must confess that I find the Gregorian calendar much more simple! They arrange the days of the year (420!) into "suitable" or "unsuitable" for various activities - birth, death, cremation, tooth filing, etc. Also in the museum were models depicting these and many more ceremonies, each with a fairly comprehensive explanation (thankfully in English). I'd like to spend much more time here, learning as much as I can about these people whose tradition and perspectives are so different from what I have always taken for granted. A few hours spent with Putu in that museum taught me more than any book could. In the Bali-Hindu religion, for example, they have one god (Tuhan), who consists of a Trinity (Shiva, Vishnu, Brahma, standing for Earth, Sea and Fire). The similarities of this to Christian dogma whetted my appetite to want to delve further into the origins of other religions of the world, and the commonalities and differences among them.

Back at Kuta we went for another very necessary swim... huge surf, warm water, uncrowded beach. Sheer heaven! The surf here seems to get better every day. The heat ashore was stifling, encouraging us to spend the rest of the day lying in the cool, cool surf... BLISS. After a delicious lunch we rode to Nusa Dua, a beautiful, secluded little beach. The sand consisted of trillions of perfectly rounded grains, each about .5mm in diameter. It was like walking on tiny ball bearings. The water just pours through them almost unhindered... as do our feet! We drank in the magnificent sunset until we were bloated with its beauty, then back to Kuta to send off some letters to Glenny via a friend. By the way, he is building a boat in Sulawesi and may want a crew in May... I feel tempted! A spectacular night to round off a beautiful day... a near-full moon casting its crystal clear shadows across the cooling sands. I'm drunk from drinking in too much of Bali... I'm afraid of the impending hangover. If I were the Ultimate Creator, I think that I could not design a more perfect tree than the Coconut palm. To experience a grove of such trees silhouetted against that huge tropical moon is something a mere camera could never capture. Not even my humble Staedtler could do justice to such a scene.

I sat for hours on the beach, watching a huge thunderstorm approach over the restless ocean. The lightning was so high in the sky that it gave an uncanny sense of three-dimensionality to the darkening clouds. There were

times when I thought I saw Garuda doing eternal battle with Charon-Arang in those skies, weaving back and forth between the swirling pillars, hurling streaks of lightning at each other, cursing loudly as the thunderous percussion provides the accompaniment in this, the largest theatre in Bali... in the Universe, in fact. This distant performance quickly came closer, and my rapt attendance was hurriedly terminated by the sound of heavy rain applauding on banana leaves. To bed, to bed, I must rest my weary, boggled brain. I wonder if I shall ever cease to be impressed by this magnificent island.

### **Day 13: Thu 27/3/75**

What a day! Off early (7 a.m.) by bemo to Besakih - a temple at the foot of the largest mountain in Bali, Agung. Every year on the day of a full moon a festival is held in each temple in Bali. Besakih, being the largest and second oldest temple has the notoriety and thus attracts the best crowd.

Unfortunately we were not allowed entry until 2 p.m. since all the Government dignitaries were there en mass. However, we waited with all the rest outside, absorbing the incredible colour and vibrant life going on all around us. People of all sorts, most in their best clothes, (this festival corresponds to Christianity's Christmas celebrations) and all carrying offerings to be blessed and presented in the temple. The temple itself is magnificent. It is really a complex of temples, three main ones and a host of smaller "family" temples. The three main ones represent Vishnu (the protector, painted black), Brahma (the creator, painted red) and Shiva (the destroyer, painted white/yellow). Each consists of large and small pagodas with an odd number of tiers. The ornateness and majesty of the carvings and entrances is extended further when one considers the age of the temple ... built in 1050 AD. ... very old by Asian standards of architecture! All day the mountain overlooking the temple was shrouded in mist. At one stage in the afternoon, the mist lifted for five minutes to reveal the most incredible sight ... 10,000 feet of sheer mountain. My eyes were wrenched from the temple and I was inspired to write these lines (unabridged) ...

### **AGUNG**

*This Mighty, Majestic Monument of Man  
Is as a grain of dust  
Dwarfed by the enormity of Agung.  
Enormity forbidding description.  
Flanks afire with cold mist  
Forever shrouding its deepest secrets.*

*Below those slopes, the feeble attempt  
Of Man's futile vanity - Besakih.  
From the make-believe world of His mind  
This thwarted attempt at immortal life  
Is as nothing beside Agung.*

*So soon to be swallowed by the reality  
That has borne this mountain.  
One small sip of Agung  
And I am drunk ...*

Need more be said of my awe on seeing this mountain? To get into this temple you had to wear "traditional dress". I borrowed this from a very

interesting American that I met at Besakih - Cliff Smith. He was fascinating to talk to. He is just completing research for an historical novel about the travels of a 7th Century Chinese monk. We had a beautiful, deep, long talk while waiting for the 2 o'clock opening. Amongst other things we discussed the frustrations one experiences when not fully conversant with the indigenous language - especially in my case where for most of my life my communication (at Uni. for example) has been on a fairly intricate level of verbal activity. To be suddenly thrust into a world where all verbal communication is restricted to superficialities I find it very difficult to judge the intelligence, interests and even nature of other people. Even when you find someone (like Putu) with whom a reasonably fluid conversation can take place, intellectual comment, etc., is severely restricted in extent since none of the interesting deviations into the fascinating world of semantics can occur. All in all, most frustrating. The sooner a Universal language is accepted the better! We also discussed the effect of "Western" culture and "progress" on the Balinese in particular and "primitive" people in general. Everyone seems to follow the thermodynamic law that says that each alteration takes the path of least resistance ... the (apparently) easiest way. Along we come with our materialistic "benefits" which seem so enticing to an economically deprived people. They then choose to accept it (is there really any choice involved? I doubt it!) and pay, just as we do, in the long run. Man tends to be so short sighted - he rarely learns from other's mistakes!

Meanwhile, back at the temple, inside I found such colour, scents and movement, and sounds to boggle the brain! There were small family groups each doing their own thing in front of their own highly decorated temples. Singing, chanting, praying, dancing or offering food to the gods - a magnificent spectacle. Unfortunately the time to go home came too soon and we had to leave this beautiful place. We had hired a bemo for the day and the driver wanted to get home early - so did we move! I don't think he touched the brakes all the way down the mountain and his overtaking exploits were something to behold. Back at Kuta (mercifully alive!) we stopped off at Poppi's Restaurant just as the second side of "Days of Future Past" was playing - as the full moon was spreading its silver glow through the palms and "Nights in White Satin" reverberating in my ears. I felt warm and content ... I really do love this life. A further interesting discussion with Cliff then home at last to dream myself back to the reality of tomorrow morning.

## **Day 14: Fri 28/3/75**

(Two weeks!)

A very lazy day - necessary to recover from (and reflect upon) the rapid inputs of the previous fortnight. Up early to write of yesterday's doings and also some letters. Then into Den Pasar by bemo - an interesting morning examining the market places and shops. I feel quite at home and more confident now when entering the crowded, bustling markets than when I first encountered them. Again I feel no fear in such places because of the friendly nature of the Balinese people. Then, finding all public places closed because of Good Friday, we went to Sanur to the Bali Beach Hotel to cash some cheques and post a letter or two. The Balinese have holidays from Christianity, Hinduism and Islam (and a few of their own) so the chances are almost 50% that a particular day is a public holiday.



The afternoon was spent on the verandah in sublime peace reading novels, chatting quietly or nodding off. After the heat of the midday sun had passed it was down to the surf - and what a surf! Six foot waves, lumpy but exceptionally surfable. Spent a couple of very enjoyable hours in this paradise. It seems strange looking out to sea at the setting sun. Makes for much better sunsets, though! Dinner at Lasis again where we met Cliff. He told us about his diving in the coral reefs - sounded fabulous so I attempted to talk him out of leaving tomorrow. I hope he doesn't go because we have a lot to talk about! He told me about an incident that had occurred the previous night which may force me to alter my previous statements about Balinese and violence. Evidently a local bike hirer was beaten up after a disagreement with a European customer. He returned with 15 mates, intent on killing his opponent. Only violent police intervention prevented a blood bath. The two

Europeans have since left Bali. And this was just down the road from my losmen! Evidently they have an "eye for an eye" philosophy and a strong sense of territoriality. You certainly wouldn't want to make any enemies here.

Another aspect of Balinese culture revealed to me today was the presence of a Hindu caste system. However, in contrast to India's hundreds of castes, Bali has only four and even this doesn't prevent any individual from achieving his occupational or social aspirations. They seem to have their origins in the fact that it was primarily princes, priests, men of letters and courtiers from the former Hindu kingdoms of Java who fled from Islamic persecution in the 15th and 16th centuries. This history might also explain the "innate" artistry and creative intelligence of these people... perhaps a similar - though opposite - analogy could be drawn with Australia's predominantly convict origins - though I doubt it. The presence of the caste system is by no means obvious, except perhaps amongst the priesthood and the administrators.

I also met my first "modern" Balinese artist. He has studied for five years and produces the most exciting black ink sketches. He showed me some of them - magnificently imaginative, revealing only the essentials of what he wishes to show. We very quickly "hit it off", mainly because he didn't even know how to sell his drawings. He seemed totally ignorant of "business practices", seemingly through his own choice. He would gladly have given me some of his "art-for-art" (not art-for-money) and would not even think of selling it - truly a unique guy! He has invited me to his home to see his oil paintings and is coming to meet me on Tuesday morning to paint the scene at Kuta - in oils. He appears to have consciously rejected traditional Balinese art and batik work, though he can do both extremely well. He prefers to use his own creative talents to those of his ancestors!

### **Day 15: Sat 29/3/75**

What started out promising to be a "nothing" day turned out to be quite eventful after all. Firstly, Cliff didn't show up at 9, so I guess he decided to fly to Hong Kong after all. So it was a morning of reading, writing and surfing... quite pleasant and enjoyable not HAVING to do anything at all. A true life of leisure, in fact. Stomach rumbles forced me in to Kuta for food. On the way I passed a house inside of which was much commotion. Being incurably inquisitive, I investigated, and discovered that they are preparing for a burial. So I forget lunch and join in the ceremony. They had just completed washing the 18 year old man, perfuming him, wrapping him in clean linen and were now placing him inside a hand-hewn coffin. There was no sorrow except for a few mournful chants from the women - but this didn't last long. It was soon drowned out by the laughter, screams and other noises from the street where the "carriers" were psyching themselves up for the procession. The now-occupied coffin was then loaded onto a platform surrounded by an ornate sort of roof. This in turn was mounted onto a platform of bamboo (what would these people do without bamboo, coconuts and banana leaves?) which was then unceremoniously lifted skywards by over 50 energetic young men. "Aboard" were two priests on the end of a cloth rope, held at the other end by a relative whose job it was to "guide" the departed to his grave. Little guiding seemed to be done, however, as the 20 piece band struck up its rhythmic music and the whole procession began its erratic course to the distant cemetery. At every intersection the carriers zig-zagged every which way, bumping into poles, people, dogs, statues, telephone wires, etc, in their joyful attempts to delude the linearly-inclined spirits. None of your slow, solemn funeral marches here! Most of the participants in the march had to run to keep up, and more than once the never faltering band was left behind!

When the platform reached the surf, however, we all had an opportunity to catch up... yes, they continued on straight into the ocean! Up to their necks, surrounded by foaming surf - made even moreso by 50 pairs of flailing arms and legs. Everything was soaked in the melee of sweat, surf and (probably) tears of laughter. The whole scene was like some huge game - and it all seemed so natural to these childlike, happy people. They would certainly not look right dressed in mourning black, tears filling their swollen, sad eyes! The one-mile march up the beach took 90 minutes, and never once was the platform lowered. Most of the time was spent in the pounding shore-break. Still, the two "protective" priests rode their wild platform with dignity and grace - not an easy task under the circumstances! And the band never ceased beating out its complicated gamelan rhythms.

Finally the cemetery was reached. The expensive cloths, etc, were removed quickly from the platform and the bamboo deck dismantled. The coffin was rapidly and irreverently (ie, sideways!) removed to the previously-dug hole,

dropped in, and then here was a mad free-for-all as everyone, myself included, threw in a handful or two of dirt. This soon transformed the hole into a mound, over which the "essentials" of his now-stripped carrying platform were placed. The whole lot was then surrounded by a little woven bamboo (what else?) fence and the band went silently home. Within minutes the place was abandoned. The only sign of any grief was a little bit of chanting by some of the women as the coffin was lowered to the ground. This, however, was drowned out by the joy of the percussion band and the shouting of orders by everyone - no-one seemed to actually be in charge. The family of the dead boy would now go home to save the money needed for the cremation - they will be fed and housed during that time by the other villagers ... everyone must be cremated in style so all the families' efforts at saving money must go towards this ceremony. The burial is only a temporary measure - the soul is never free until the body is burned.

Walking back home, I got to try out one of the drums - really great, the variation in sound from ONE drum leaves my whole kit for dead! Back home, a feed, a delightful surf and I re-hire a bike (Honda 125) for a week. Then to bed.

### **Day 16: Sun 30/3/75**

An unbelievable day! Firstly I rode into Sanur for the purpose of seeing some art galleries and a famous shell collection ... neither of which I got to see! On the way I caught up to many truck-loads of gaily dressed, happy Balinese with towers, gold, gifts, etc. ... all the makings of another ceremony.

Following it to the South end of Sanur beach I learnt that it was to be the third and final ceremony following someone's death ... namely the Purification rites. What a big deal this was! Virtually the whole village had come, bearing both the ashes of the recently cremated man from Ubud plus countless offerings and effigies. Over 100 people, all dressed in their "Sunday best" took active part ... an old priest of indeterminate gender presided over the whole thing dousing everything in sight with Holy Water, the ever-present percussion providing background for the occasional chanting. Again, of course, this was a happy ceremony. After much organisation (via loudspeaker!) the villagers were all facing the ocean, deep in prayer and incense - sitting in a straight line with only their countless little offerings between them and the small surf (high tide). Then, after being blessed by the priest, all offerings and effigies were burned in special clay containers. The ashes were mixed carefully with perfume, flowers, incense, etc. then loaded into the omnipurpose hollowed coconut, wrapped tenderly in colourful cloth and leaves, then borne on each person's head (each group consisted of about 8 people) to a waiting boat, a final blessing then out to sea to be spread upon the waters, along with further offerings - one in the form of a live duck with a stone tied to its faintly quacking neck! The Balinese never hurry their ceremonies and this was no exception. Each group took great care in carrying out their tasks - each performed exactly alike - and the whole thing took at least half a day.



I then took off for the museum in Den Pasar where I made the notes I had previously promised myself to do. On the way home I saw my artist friend

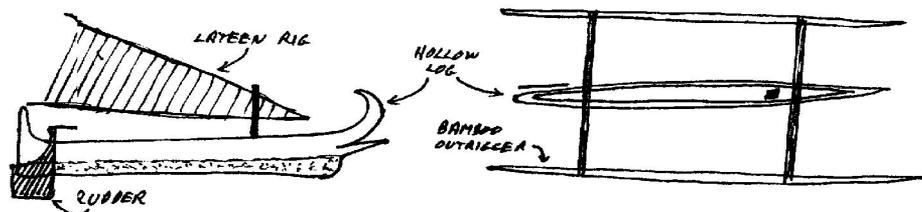
(Emmink) walking along the road with a large canvas under his arm. We then both rode to Legian Beach five miles north of Kuta where we settled down for an extremely relaxed afternoon of painting, sketching, talking and eating. He is the most unique Balinese I have so far met. His sincerity and outgoing friendliness is only matched by his extensive skill as an artist. His sketches and oil paintings are truly fantastic. We then stopped at a friend's restaurant for a beautiful - and free - meal. We could really communicate well (verbal limitations are not so apparent between friends!) and the honest friendship that developed no doubt warmed both our hearts. Back then to his house on the outskirts of Den Pasar ... a real poor part of town but again the people seemed genuinely happy. All of them were interested in why a white man should venture into that part of town. More coffee and talking led to him GIVING me the most fabulous painting of a cock fight that I could possibly imagine. He refused all of my intentions of paying for it - really quite a guy! Making my way home I felt happy and reassured at the goodness of mankind, considering today to have been full to overflowing with worthwhile experience, never believing what was lying ahead of me that night!



Sitting quietly on the verandah attempting to begin writing up the day's happenings, two guys suddenly appeared in the small ring of light. Introducing themselves as Brian and Richard, they had heard of my interest in native boats (Prahus and Jukungs) and had come for some information about purchasing one. Well, to cut it short, 6 hours later, after constant, in-depth argumentation/discussion about everything from boats to infinity, I found myself seriously considering embarking on a voyage that would abound in intrigue, glory, adventure, much money and, above all, excitement. However, since the written word can become incriminating in the future, details will here be omitted for verbal completion later on. It amounted to my

agreeing to view some Jukungs with them tomorrow, with the aim of purchasing one, fitting it out for ocean travel, and sailing to various places picking up and delivering certain (highly suspect) cargoes. At this stage I have given no firm commitment... I am free to make up my own mind to join in the venture or not. Brian is the most self-confident, intelligent, interesting and amusing character that I've ever met... nothing could ever go wrong according to him! He even believes that he can stop the rain! We got on famously. Our discussions rarely descended below 30,000 feet. The mental stimulation was more than usually welcome after the frustrations of the limited verbalisations discussed before. He has been to places and seen things that most of us don't even get to read about. I am sorely tempted to join them but I'll bide my time.

The adventure of the voyage must be viewed from the proper perspective... including the knowledge of what a Jukung is. It is, in fact, a hollowed-out 23 foot log with added freeboard, with bamboo outriggers and closed-in deck, topped off with a tatty, flexible lateen rig:



To this basic shape was to be added a half-cabin and a plywood catwalk... since the main hull is really just a log, it really is very narrow (2' at most!). Well, we finally parted company at 2 am, both of us over-excited, with a plan to meet five hours later to travel to Nusa Penida - ie., where the vessels are reputed to be made. As I began - what an unbelievable day!

### **Day 17: Mon 31/3/75**

Four hours sleep then off to Sanur without time for breakfast ... much haggling and hassling eventually gets us a round-trip ride in a 20' Jukung to Nusa Penida and back. This island is only about 20 miles away (you can see it from shore) so none of us had any "luggage" at all - merely what we were wearing. The scene: one Jukung, old and unpainted; one old skipper and one crewman; one old lady, three Balinese men and the three of us (Brian, Richard and me). Surrounding us were numerous containers of flour, rice, cement, water, beer etc. No-one spoke English at all so I had my first crash course in Indonesian - the best way to learn! Brian speaks it fairly well, I a little, but Richard not at all - and I forgot my dictionary. The wind at first was light but astern. Soon we were becalmed but then the wind strengthened from dead ahead. This Jukung doesn't point at all ... about 60 degrees if there is no chop. Result ... 8 hours to do the 20 mile trip. We landed at the skipper's place on Nusa Penida just on dusk - tired, thirsty and very hungry. On the way our feeble but improving efforts at Indonesian impressed the skipper (Panmade) and others, resulting in a welcome friendship. We were invited to his home (nowhere else to go!) where very strong coffee, rice, and a very small fried chicken was sold to us (a shrewd business man, this captain) - he had a monopoly in this "next-to-deserted" part of the island!).

The last white man here was apparently in 1973 so, of course, we were the objects of a great deal of wide-eyed, open-mouthed examination by his numerous relatives, children and others. Every breath we took, every word we uttered, was attended to closely. Everywhere we looked we saw dozens of large brown eyes unblinkingly following our every move. The children were delightful - beautiful, in fact. The girls were likewise - round, soft features - all enhanced by that ever-present, glistening white Balinese smile. We managed to see some clapped-out Prahus and one or two derelict Jukungs. We were a little disappointed at not seeing more. We then settled down three in a bed to get some shut-eye before the scheduled midnight departure. The currents here are fierce, so you must time your voyage carefully. What with dogs (not used to white men too!), chooks, kids and adults barking, crowing, peeping and talking (respectively) none of us could sleep. Anyway, the mat on which we lay was choc-a-bloc with bed bugs, fleas, cockroaches, beetles and assorted other fauna all designed to destroy one's slumber. So again a long fantastic talk into the night. The rest is tomorrow's story ...

## **Day 18: Tue 1/4/75**

A lo-o-ong, eventful day. Midnight found us picking our way seawards through the shallow, sandy channels of Nusa Penida. The threatening clouds in the sky couldn't quite conceal the presence of a three-quarter moon - we could see quite well! Three hours out the clouds threatened no longer ... they poured forth buckets of wind-driven wet fury. Within seconds the quiet, peaceful, midnight cruise became a balls-and-all struggle for survival. The skipper immediately lowered his frail cotton sail, battened down all loose cargo and hid in his cockpit! We (ie. the three of us, a crewman and a Balinese woman) were left to our own devices on the heaving, bucking, tossing deck. With nothing but a cheesecloth shirt to keep me warm and a holey piece of canvas for "shelter" I joined the others in their purple-fingered, shivering, goose-pimpled and teeth-chattering coldness (or was it fear?). There we were - pitch black, not a light in sight, no steerage way, bobbing about like a large cork, covered with rain and solid salt water (kindly dumped upon us by an angry Vishnu, no doubt), the skipper resignedly afraid, the passengers cold, wet and lost, and the waves getting decidedly larger.

Dawn saw us in the same predicament - only worsened by the amount of water aboard. It soon abated to a mild typhoon, whereupon the bailing out began. This finished, we headed for shelter at a nearby island. We landed on the beach quite exhausted, but mainly cold (tropics, huh!). At the rare sight of three white men the whole fishing village downed tools and came to observe these purple, shivering Caucasoids. No-one spoke English but the fun we had attempting communication with these beautiful people was incredible. They fed us, warmed us and quenched our thirst. They followed us everywhere ... the beauty of the women has to be seen to be believed - also their forwardness and apparent desires for promiscuity - without even a hint of embarrassment or inhibition! We spent a fantastic day viewing the small island, talking with the locals and generally enjoying the pleasures such a paradise as this has to offer. One can see nearly all of Bali from here. Agung looks more incredible than ever (oh, for my sketch pad!). The sun shone on us for most of the afternoon. Brian successfully negotiated to buy the very Jukung that brought us here - all amid such jollity and friendliness that it all seemed to be unreal! The sand, the palms, the coral, the views; all seemed to have come from a dream - a dream of an unattainable island paradise. I could easily see myself spending quite some time (a lifetime?) in a place such as this. The pace of life is almost stationary - in fact, it stopped still when we came ashore! "It is something much more than luck that brought us here", argues Brian. I, of course, must disagree ... we differ in our basic assumptions. This only goes to make subsequent intellectual gymnastics all the more stimulating and interesting. One such academic argument occurred in the boatshed surrounded by a sea of dark brown eyes, all following the action as in a tennis match, not understanding a single word but none-the-less, overtly attentive.

After a beaut dinner of roast chicken and rice (again!) we got to sleep at last in the home of Putu, a fisherman who lives in the hills ... very steep and slippery entrance, but a beautiful house - by their standards, at least. We got to sleep in the two bedrooms the house possesses while the owner and his wife and all their kids slept (get this!) outside the door and window - against all our best intentions and persuasions they would not come inside! What a privilege the white colour of one's skin is - it sounds like it should prove embarrassing but funnily enough it seems to be very natural - both to us and to them! We all slept for just a couple of hours - same problem as previous night (noise) but no bed bugs, etc.!

## **Day 19: Wed 2/4/75**

Again we shoved off just after midnight. The wind was about 10 to 12 knots, the sea sloppy. We close-reached to Sanur ... the boat, probably knowing it had its potential owners aboard, excelled itself by performing beautifully. We all learnt a lot about sailing this type of craft ... we sure will need all the training we can get! The sunrise was nothing short of magnificent. It was like the final explosion of a sky rocket. For days now I have metaphorically been soaring higher and higher - I have rarely in my life felt as "good" as this - ie. content, happy, excited, scared, free, etc. As we neared the welcoming shoreline of Sanur Beach, the sun exploded into view astern, climaxing my ascending spirits, encouraging me onwards to even better things (is that possible?). It is here that the metaphor and the reality depart ... whereas the rocket now fizzles and dies my spirits achieved a new perspective - I really am glad to be alive! At Sanur I parted company with the other two - they went to begin purchasing materials for the boat, I went home to rest my weary body and exhausted brain. Even exhaustion can become a state of bliss if you have the right attitude. I feel a vastly different person than I was two weeks ago ... two days ago! There is one thing only that I regret and that is that the person I love could not share these things and these changes with me. Glenny would no doubt experience similar feelings to those I am now having if only she would allow herself to. I really miss the closeness that I had with her - there are things I want to say to no-one but she, for no-one but her would understand. I truly do love her ...

Good grief, this diary is getting worse! Less and less like a diary. Now where was I? Oh yes, ... Sanur. From thence by bemo to Kuta to wake up a worried (?) Chris and Chris. They had figured what had happened because the storm hit Kuta badly too. Having told my story to them and discussing it objectively (ie., with someone not directly affected) I concluded that what I was possibly letting myself in for would have dire psychological effects in later years (guilt, doubt, etc.) and (1) I don't need all the promised fortune (2) I don't believe in selling (or even using) what our cargo would have been, and (3) if it was for the sailing adventure alone I would not hesitate to go. So ... the decision is to decline the offer. A pity in some ways, but a 20 year gaol sentence is not my idea of seeing Indonesia! I haven't told the Terrible Two yet; they won't know for several days. I have left a note with the skipper of the boat. They will be very disappointed since they have come to depend on me and the last two days have all been acted out as if I were definitely going. But it can't be helped! THEN (struth, I'll finish this bloody diary if it's the last thing I do!) back to Ratna ... (1) to write all of this, (2) to pay money and leave, (3) to pack my things, (4) to write letters, (5) to cash more money (\$120 so far!). I hopped on my bike and headed northwards to the mountains. The other two went by bus - I'm to meet them at Penolokan...

Well, I'm now in Penelokan writing this. AND WHAT A PLACE ... situated on the lip of a huge crater inside of which is another (still active) volcano - Mt. Batur - with the scar of its most recent eruption (1963) reaching down its slopes into a most exquisite deep blue crater lake. A most breath-taking sight. It's also bloody freezing. It seems for the last few days all I've done is shiver! We are staying in rooms with the most beautiful outlook in all of Bali (maybe the world?). The food is good, the company is excellent, the view is fantastic and life is "sangat bagus bagus"!

## **Day 20 Thu 3/4/75**

A beautiful sleep in my down sleeping bag (in Bali!) It is quite cold up here but the air is fresh, biting and invigorating. I needed that sleep after so much excitement and energy expenditure in the last few days. I woke up in time to watch the most beautiful sunrise I've yet seen ... even better than yesterday's! The view here is so magnificent that you would find it hard to imagine a sunrise that could do it justice ... not so! The crater lake resembled a huge mirror reflecting the fiery sky which preceded the glowing brilliance of the dawning sun. The remnants of the '63 lava flow seems again to be afire - but their coldness bears witness to a clinging mist, not smoke. The greens, greys, browns and blacks of this mighty mountain are at their best when seen in the morning sunlight. If time allows I will try to sketch it but I feel so inferior in my ability that I fear I will do such a scene an injustice. An early breakfast, then Chris went off on an all-day boat trip on the lake while Christine and I hopped on the bike and headed north to the Java Sea coast.

The scenery on the way was indescribable in mere written words, so I make no attempt except that all the cliches used to describe "a mountain scene" would apply. A few of the mountain temples are quite spectacular, not only in their position but in their generally overgrown-green appearance. The people here in the mountains are different to the coastal Balinese. These are the original Balinese stock - taller, thinner with darker skin and harder lines in their faces. One village on Lake Batur is virtually untouched by the outside. They still live as they have for centuries. They don't cremate their dead but leave them lying above the ground. Their houses are very poor but the houses on the shoreline itself are tremendous (painted and all!). These are used only on religious occasions.

When we eventually reached the coast the heat nearly killed us - as did the kindness and friendliness of these people for whom a white skin is still something of a novelty. The beaches here are black. the Jukungs are small and badly built, the rocky headlands (also black) are impressive and the mile after mile of picture-postcard tropical beachside scenery with its soft sand shores surrounded by swaying coconut palm groves again made it hard to believe I wasn't dreaming. The ride back up the mountain was freezing and wet. We hid ourselves in a restaurant and talked to several very interesting people for the rest of the evening, eating constantly. All around was grey, damp, penetrating mist. You couldn't see an inch in front of you all afternoon and evening, let alone see anything of the view. All in all the day was relaxing, pleasant, and a necessary change. I hope the mist lifts by tomorrow for some sketching.

## **Day 21: Fri 4/4/75**

(3 weeks!)

Anyone reading this is probably well and truly sick of hearing "... and yet another wonderful day", but I assure you, I'll never get sick of writing it. Yes, today was another one! Woke up to another fantastic sunrise but there was far too much mist about to sketch the mountain and crater lake. Christine caught the bus back to Kuta (all her clothes were wet from yesterday's ride). Chris stayed on at Penolokan for the morning, to go to the north coast by bus in the afternoon. I left early by bike complete with 40 lb pack on my back, and took virtually every back road along the way. This is how one really gets to see the untouched Bali. Firstly I went north over an unbelievably hill and dale track from Penolokan to Tejakula (unmarked on map). Then east along the coast to Temukus - this coast road took me through the sea part of Singaraja - a completely un-Balinese-like town (half Moslem, half Chinese, great affluence in the suburbs alongside great poverty, modern bemos and antique carriages). None of the little Balinese offerings placed delicately and precariously in front of their shops to placate the gods - a very commercial town. Also very hot, just to amplify the contrasts I have experienced, I guess! This coast seems to be the resort area of Bali and many excellently positioned "home stays" are to be seen nursed in small coconut groves, just touching the warm shallow waters of the Java Sea. However, I can't stay, I've more to see.

So back to Singaraja then south (at last!) up the mountains through the rain. Through incredible gorges, past majestic mist-shrouded lakes, along knife-edge volcanic ridges, on roads of tar, gravel, dirt and mud. I was almost bursting with the joy of the whole scene. Who needs to "trip" when you can trip. On Lake Bratan (high in the mountains) was a beautiful temple built half in the water and half out. Outside its walls was a small tower with statues of Buddha - very unusual but further emphasising the Buddhist influence in Balinese Hinduism. From a small pagoda in the lake, holy water is removed each year for transport to the crops to ensure fertility. It is also sipped by the Balinese to make their words clean. It also purifies the cremated person and protects new houses from evil spirits ... no ordinary water, this! Here I met Martin, a German traveler also reconnoitering the island by bike. We talked for some time then decided to ride together to Pura Batukaru - the first Hindu temple ever built in Bali.

It proved to be as inaccessible as it was old. Very few tourists ever see it because (1) it is discouraged by the devout Hindus who consider it very holy, and (2) the road there is suitable only for walking (or mad bike riders!). Through mud up to our eyeballs, drenched to the skin, the only evidence to our humanity being the gleam of our incisors as we laughed our way onward through impossible conditions. Past acres of rice paddies, through bamboo

forests with trees as thick as telegraph poles, over mountain ridges so covered in mist that you could hardly see a foot in front of you. Who wanted to anyway? All you could see was mud! Martin fell off ("came to ze ground!") half a dozen times, but my past experience prevented my coming to grief - and I had no clutch (it broke at Penolokan) and a huge pack on my back - I couldn't stand up. Not surprisingly, the people we met along the way had very rarely seen a white man and could not even speak Indonesian. They literally mobbed us whenever we emerged from the deep mud of the "scrub" to the shallower mud of their villages. Not one of the villages (some quite sizeable) was marked on my map! Not surprisingly we got lost a couple of times and ended up at Air Panas (literally, and quite appropriately translated as "hot water") where a temple was built around a huge sacred banyan tree with a pool of hot water, fed from underground, at its base. A very holy place once again despoiled by commercialism - one hundred Rps to have a bath in their Western, porcelain bath tubs - complete with private room (tiled, of course!).

Eventually we reached the temple of Batukaru. Boy, was it worth the trip! No one in sight bar ourselves and the gods. The temple is so old it has become part of the dense, immense rain forest surrounding and penetrating it. It was a huge, green/grey, dripping testament to man's unending ability to worship his gods. The peace was ear-splitting. The sight mind-grabbing. And our mud-covered bodies felt suitably clothed for such a majestic place - we blended so well we seemed a part of the mud brick walls. Feeling suitably refreshed and elated at the success of our odyssey, we headed for the dry warmth of Kuta ... a quick trip through the dark and drizzle, stopping only to absorb the fantastic, fiery, warming wonder of the sun's "sunset encore" (performed each day same time, same station). We eventually reached home tired, dirty, wet and cold but thoroughly pleased. Thus ends another day in the life and loves of K.B. Murray.

## **Day 22: Sat 5/4/75**

Saw the sunrise on the beach - not as good as the mountain sunrise but good nonetheless, seeing the sun ascend slowly through the ever present palm leaves. The Balinese for sun is mata hari, literally "eye of the day" - a very poetic language, this! A quick dip in the tranquil, early morning ocean then home to a new losmen to write a few letters and postcards. Then into Den Pasar to post same. Mailed my painting to Glennie - hope she shows it to Dad some time. I'm really excited - my second letter! This one from Mum, Dad and Yvonne (of all people). I devoured every word at least three times. It's funny but I didn't think that news from home would affect me much, but I was truly elated and hope that I can receive more, no matter where I am in the future. This morning was reserved for "essentials" - mailing, money changing, washing, etc. But the afternoon was very different...

After a beautiful lunch, Christine and I decided to make the most of the last afternoon with the bike. We headed north again via a different route to the usual, pausing every now and then to hide in roadside stalls, from the torrential downpours that seemed to end as quickly as they begin. Along with practicing our Indonesian with the various inhabitants of these stalls, we got a chance to read some news magazines one of them had for sale ... the world certainly seems in a very bad, touchy state of affairs. We have heard virtually nothing since we left Sydney - Sneddon's deposition, the Vietnam debacle, Faisal's murder, Onassis's death, etc. are all news items about which we knew at best only vague rumours. It all seems so depressing and so far away. The people here don't seem to read newspapers and, of course, there is little radio and no TV available, so the communication that we took so much for granted in Australia is just non-existent here. The world could collapse around Bali yet life would still go on as before. Isolationist, yes, yet also desirable in many ways. Somehow the letter from home held more interest for me than did Time magazine.



Eventually we reached Legian where Emmink and I had been earlier to do his painting. Christine was rapt by the severe beauty of the place - dominated by this most beautiful temple called the "magic box". Evidently it contains an ancient Sanskrit scroll which has never been translated, but when it is, the "key" will be found. All very mystical and, true or not, it sure fits the vibrations I received from this peaceful, silent, secretive place. Nearby there was another temple, also unadvertised, which, although smaller, was equally impressive. It was set in the middle of an area of dense rain forest, everything green - the walls themselves seemed to be growing beside a winding river which almost formed a complete moat around this holy place.

In both temples was found the holiest of trees - the banyan - with its tortured limbs and twisted roots bearing witness both to the antiquity of such structures and to the way Balinese can find beauty in even the most ugly of things. The banyan is not a pretty tree but by being raised to a level of awesome holiness it achieves a great degree of respect and admiration which no "pretty" tree (eg. a palm) could ever hope to achieve. (reminds me of some "ordinary looking" people!). To me the niches formed by the convolutions, twistings and contortions of the enormous trunk and roots seemed to hide the secrets of centuries - becoming as mysterious as their religion. Legian is renowned for its "black magic" and there is an enormous hotel nearby which, it seems, was not consecrated properly when it was built. Consequently a "hex" was put on it and ever since it has been the biggest flop in Bali. Mysterious indeed. To see the "eye of the day" turn blood red and sink below the horizon in resigned splendour from the vantage point of this mystical place filled me with a strange uneasiness and I was glad to get back to the reality of my room to sleep and dream of further days ...

### **Day 23: Sun 6/4/75**

What a life it is when you are answerable to no one, doing what you please without feelings of compulsion or guilt. Such a day as this was today. The sun was shining, the breeze just enough to refresh the body, the waves small but perfectly formed and the water warm. So what did I do? I did the relaxing tourist bit ... wrote letters, read my books, lazed joyfully beneath the warming glow of the Balinese sun and spent hours (yes, me!) in the tropical paradise of the foaming warmth and enjoyment of the ever present, always enticing Balinese surf. Yes, nothing I could not have done in Australia yet the setting is completely different and, of course, my own peace of mind has altered enough not to spoil such an idyllic day with nagging thoughts of "having" to do something as an alternative. This type of thought seems to have penetrated much of my life in the past. The pace of my life has been such that complete relaxation of mind and body has been next to impossible. All through High School and University (and teaching) I always had some alternative compelling urgency which instilled guilt into my moments of meditation, relaxation or other "time-wasting" activities - so much so that such a state became progressively unattainable. Ironically, then, when you need to, you can't, and when you can, you may not need to! It was with such a mind that I could sit and absorb the sunset ... delete all that I have written previously about sunsets - this one beat them all.



Perhaps it was in reality better or perhaps my mind has become progressively more receptive to such beauty and thus more appreciative. I'm glad I didn't bring a camera to Bali since no two dimensional plastic emulsion could do justice to such scenes as this. Having a pupil for a shutter and a mind for unexposed film enables you to "see" more than just the light rays ... you can feel the mood of what you observe, yet as in most of Western culture, Man tries to let machines do everything for him, even store visual impressions,

forgetting that there is always much more to a scene than the scene itself!  
Thus also is sketching much more "honest" ...

The scene must first be assimilated in the brain before it is committed to two dimensions. With a sketch you can see more, with a camera less than sight alone. Unfortunately, though, black and white is unreal also. Anyway, the book I'm reading is "The Word" by Irving Wallace, an excellent absorbing novel. Usually novels are not my "thing" but this one is spot on. Exactly how a novel should be presented. Not an implausible plot either. Well worth reading, especially after "Judas My Brother". I'm so glad my perspective of religion is no longer restricted by the "monopia" of Catholicism - it makes me so much more tolerant and understanding of others' views. A fulfilling day, this one.

## **Day 24: Mon 7/4/75**

This morning I informed Brian and Richard of my decision. I went to Sanur to catch a Jukung going their way but it did not arrive until that night and departure was very uncertain anyway. I really did want to see them to offer the necessary explanations, reasons, etc. in order to "logically justify" my stance. Both Brian and myself would have to, we are that kind of people! Personal confrontation, then, being impossible the next best had to be done. I carefully composed a letter which I hope he will accept and, paying one of the fishermen a small amount, entrusted it to his care to see that it gets to Brian as soon as possible. Although not very happy with this alternative (but, it being unavoidable, there is little else I could do) I headed to Den Pasar by bemo free of charge ... why? Because the boy who usually collects the fares and I had such a tremendous conversation (we could speak the other's language to about the same level) that he was so pleased and refused to accept my fare. As with Emmink's and Putu's friendships this pleased me greatly. Not, of course, for the money saved but for the wonderful attitude that it represented. Here one's first impression is that all values - friendship included - seem measured in money. It takes some time, patience, and a good deal of effort to realise that there are some Balinese who still cherish their "pre-tourist" values. Like those in the remote mountain villages or on the very remote Nusas (islands) or like this bemo operator. Such attitudes still restore my faith in the potential of humankind.

Back in Den Pasar I spent some time wandering the filthy back streets looking in vain for Emmink's home. I'll have to get a motor bike because there are so many, all looking much alike. I hope I can find it again. Walking through such places makes me realise that no matter how "equal" you would like to be, it is impossible when in the eyes of the locals you are so different... The children, especially, follow your every step - mouths and eyes agape. I'm sure if you turned suddenly and said "boo" they would instantly scatter, disappearing into the mud and garbage burrows from whence they appeared. Communication is next to impossible, not only because little of our verbal language is in common, but because each action and word of mine seemed to be considered fretful, violent or humorous ... not to be answered but to be observed as one would observe a kinetic art form on a museum shelf. A silent testimony to the ageless gap between cultures and (ugh!) skin colours.

Anyway, back home for an instant replay of yesterday except that Chris arrived from the mountains to tell us his adventures (how much it cost, where the best deal was, how unclean was the water, how he solved every problem that arose in his infallible way, etc.) He is totally adapted to survival in a bread and butter world of practicality. I find it all too confusing and complex to assimilate into my thoughts. I find myself more and more forming general conceptual patterns about the things I am now experiencing. This is the only

way I can achieve my perspective on life. I see the forest, Chris the leaves!  
Both of us seem to survive and in some circumstances I wish I could concern myself with what I consider to be the trivialities of life but internally I get a great deal of reward from my heightening perspectives and clarity of concepts. Besides, a bread and butter person I am not and since I am what I am there is no cause for regret ... I'm (almost) perfectly happy. I think, however, that if I did not have the strength of Glenny's love to "stabilise" me (and it has often, even in her absence) then probably the reality of life's practicalities would push me under, broad concepts and all! I find the two Chris's constant "what if-ing" to become like a broken record but I still retain my ability to turn off. They both realise it now and dutifully respect it. Like leaving me alone with my warming sunsets - departing without a word. Everyone gains, although it may seem strange but essential to me. I find the peace (and hopefully quiet) of the sunset and early evening to be priceless as a time for "thought development". Like a conscious dreaming where the day's events are filed in the brain under pre-defined conceptual headings - making it ready for the next day's input!

I met a girl - Lesley, American - just completing her PhD thesis on Thai linguistics. A very long, very interesting dialogue ensued. I am finding linguistic evolution to be fascinating and hope to delve deeper into it in the future (along with all those other things!). Dead tired, another day ends finding me in my blissfully meditative, restful and horizontal Yoga position, snoring Balinese snores ... ie. much percussion! (so I'm told, anyway).

## **Day 25: Tue 8/4/75**

A most enjoyable day of swimming, surfing, sunbathing, writing, talking and relaxing. It may sound slack, but I have really enjoyed the unforced freedom of this life - resting from the hassles, the rush, the non-stop experiences of the previous weeks in order to appreciate what I've learnt, and to prepare my mind for anticipated future intellectual bombardments.



Also the surf is so good! I've never swum as much before. The water is so clear and warm and the waves are "just right". Today, I actually spent a total of 5 hours in the water - unheard of for me in the relatively cold waters of Australia. I really do enjoy the simple, straightforward pleasures of shooting a well-formed wave - it so easily occupies one's body without having to occupy one's brain. The tropical sun seems to penetrate to your bones... Its radiant warmth inviting you to plunge deeply into the refreshing wetness of the brilliant white-foaming ocean. The occasional sun-shower is like a gift from the sky - to relieve the burning presence of its diurnal "eye". How pleasant is this life. And how easy it is to meet with and talk to people of all kinds. Being labeled as a "traveler" seems to give you a license to open conversation immediately with total strangers, without the usual inhibitions to such intercourse... (Hello. Where are you from? How long will you stay? Where are you going next?). Such communication is even easier on the beach, and the conversations which follow are mostly open, honest, and above all, interesting. You tend to meet so many people that they merge into an ocean of faces and experiences. Only a few individuals rise above this as excitingly new and refreshing "islands". It is of these few that I make mention... Emmink, Putu, Brian, Lesley, etc. While not forgetting that the more "practical" information about journeying is freely passed on by almost everyone we meet. Most of these details, however, I gladly leave to the two Chrises to satisfy their "what-if" curiosities.

Glenny would no doubt be pleased to learn of my pleasure at reading "The Word". Oh how I wish I could write like that! Maybe someday. I consider my life now as an INPUT phase... Where my aim is mainly to digest and

assimilate. Hopefully to be later regurgitated in the form of a book. Who knows? As with any good meal, meanwhile, I'm enjoying it thoroughly.

Have you ever surfed in the gathering gloom of a tropical sunset, with waves towering over the shadowy depths, only to crash in a splash of white, fuming foam, tinged with droplets of pink by the evening sky? Try it sometime and blow your mind!

P.S. I think I'm a happy man!!!

## **Day 26: Wed 9/4/75**

Awakened by the refreshing coolness of an early morning surf, Christine and I ventured forth into the cacophony that is Den Pasar. Past the boisterous markets with their unimaginable array of goods. Past the food stalls with their orchestra of odours (both pleasant and un-). Into that sauna bath on wheels that is called bemo, and down lanes that in bygone times echoed to the comforting sounds of horse drawn carriages - with their bells, hooves and old wooden wheels interrupting the tropical stillness. These same lanes now resound to the ear-splitting, bone-shaking, mind numbing cackle of two stroke engines spitting forth their noisy, polluting message heralding the arrival of "civilisation" to Bali. We found our way to "Imigrasi" to renew our visas. Since we needed a ticket out of Bali, and since we didn't have enough money to bribe the officers, we had no luck. Dejected, we made our way back to the Post Office. More bad luck... no letters. (It's funny - if I hadn't received any letters I would not be expecting any, but those two from home have whetted my appetite for more!). Back to Kuta once more for the soothing distraction of the surf and the warming comfort of Mata Hari. I finally finished "The Word". It has had quite an effect on me - restoring my faith in the power of cynicism, rationality and scepticism. How can anyone be honest in their beliefs if they are not in possession of all the facts first?

More surf, sun and peaceful relaxing then off to a most delicious fish meal. Christopher and I then decided to take in a dance being performed nearby - the Ketjak (monkey) dance.



THE KECHAK DANCE

We were given a program which describes the origin and performance of the dance, along with the story being told. What it doesn't describe is the mystical spell weaved by the hundred swaying, chanting men who, as one, provide the accompaniment for the drama enacted at their hub. No film could capture

that feeling. No recording could do justice to their performance. Voices and motion combined with the majesty of a tropical evening to produce such wonderment that seemed to penetrate deep inside, creating such a feeling of mystery while encouraging you not to seek any solution! Such is the magic of this Balinese dance... such is the magic of Bali! There was no accompaniment other than that incessant trance-like "tjak... tjak... tjak" of the 100 men. Surely a vocal performance on par with Handel's "Messiah"?

As if this experience wasn't enough for our feeble little brains, on the way home, spirits high and feeling great, we heard some gamelan music nearby. Following the sounds, we came across an old temple, since "updated" with a tin roof. Inside was a full gamelan orchestra. Most of the musicians seemed to be in training. To watch and listen to them practice was pleasure enough, but to witness the concurrent teaching of the Balinese dance to a small group of girls was something else! The teacher, believe it or not, was a huge, fat Balinese gent, in his early thirties. He looked as if he would trip over his own two feet, but when he was showing the girls the intricate, precise movements of the Ramayana, his grace would put a gazelle to shame. He would stand behind them, correcting their slightest mistake by a swift, well-intentioned jolt to the offending limb. Often he would grab their hands from behind and dance with them. He seemed to have more flexibility and agility than any of these sleek teenage girls. Every minute movement of the eyes, fingers, shoulders, neck, feet and toes is carefully choreographed and has a specific meaning to the Balinese. Every single muscle is employed in rigid, accentuated and often jerking motion... all merging into a wondrous spectacle of grace, beauty and elegance. Seeing the "amateurs" at work has given me a much greater appreciation of the professional dancers... and how!

And another fulfilling day draws to a close...

### **Day 27: Thu 10/4/75**

A disappointing morning. We went to enquire about buying exit tickets from Indonesia (for our visa renewal) but encountered several "snags":

- 1) It costs \$100 to fly from Djakarta to Singapore!
- 2) It's only \$30 from Madang to Penang, but it takes a week and our visas will have expired by then.
- 3) There are no "open" tickets available in Sumatra.
- 4) There are no bookable ferries between Sumatra and Malaysia.

Result: no ticket. Therefore, dejection.

Den Pasar was so noisy and sticky that we seek the comfort of the sea again. I borrowed a surf-float this time... it was great fun. I tried to teach a Dutch girl how to surf. I told her it was an essential prerequisite as she was en route to Australia - she may not make it that far!

Chris is a bit sick, but I think that a drama critic would be of more use than a doctor... It seems aggravated by his missing Peta, his girlfriend. He was talking of leaving our trio in Japan to work to earn enough money to bring her to him. Absence, however, seems to distort one's feelings and, knowing this, I think he now has quite a few doubts about this plan. The hassles we experienced this morning did little for his mood, but we have been forewarned about Chris's moody, hypochondriatic bouts so we're playing it easy. Hopefully our visa troubles will be sorted out tomorrow. We've already wasted too much time on such red tape. Wouldn't it be so much more enjoyable if there were true freedom of travel worldwide? Just as there is no restriction on the World's air or water, there should be no restriction on culture or ideas... Natural Selection would then eventually make it the best of all possible worlds!

The surf, sunbaking and, of course, the sunset, made an otherwise disappointing day almost worthwhile! (Excuse my sarcasm.)

## **Day 28: Fri 11/4/75**

(4 weeks!)

The kind of day it is better to forget... although I have learnt many hard lessons. I was dramatically and suddenly awakened at 4am by Christine bursting into my room - "Kevin, Kevin, my bag's been taken. Someone just ran up the path...!". So, without thinking, off I go, naked but for my sleeping sheet and a torch, not fully knowing what I was looking for - my brain running on pure adrenalin. Chris, Steve and the others soon join me in combing the area. We find Chris's clothes dumped nearby - the bag and her jeans are the only things missing. Worse, though, Lesley's whole pack has vanished, and she was not even here! We spend until daybreak searching the area, then the next door kids found the bags - Lesley's slashed open, contents strewn everywhere. From Lesley's belongings we know not what is lost. To top it all off, however, I discover that my wallet has been ransacked - and I sleep with it by my pillow! All my money has been taken - about \$18 Aus. Nothing else of mine seemed to be touched.

This was not a nice way to start the day. The whole village soon knew of the excitement, and the losmen was quickly abuzz with children, police, dogs, and others, delaying us even further from the "early start" we wished to get. As with my earlier glasses episode, no-one accused the Balinese... everyone blamed the Javanese! The speed with which the thief discarded his haul indicates that our torch lights might have scared him off - I was actually very near to the place where the bags were found, soon after Christine gave the alarm! Imagine the gall of someone to sneak into an occupied room and take stuff from right under the sleeper's nose! I still find it hard to believe that it's happened. You read about it happening to others but never to yourself!

Eventually we gathered our collective senses and headed to Sanur for the day's business... yet another story of red tape and administrative hassles, best forgot. The net result is that I'm \$140 poorer but at least possessing the ticket necessary for our visa renewal. All this done, and with the clock indicating 3pm, it was time for my salt water consolation. All the morning's hassles - aggravated by Christopher's patronising "I'm never wrong" attitude - have added up to the first really shithouse day of the previously idyllic holiday. Let's hope that the "days of many joys" return soon to our travelling trio. It's days like today that I feel the need for someone near to me... someone to talk to and to assure me that it will all soon pass. I miss Glenny more than ever today. Anyway, the surf was a welcome reprieve... 6 - 8 feet and dumping. I got dumped for the first time in many years... and boy, did I get dumped! I hit the bottom in 6 feet of water. But I enjoyed every minute of it nonetheless. Lesley arrived home after tea to the news of the robbery. At least she was pleased not to have lost it all. She also lost only jeans and shirts... the thief left

a \$200 lens and her expensive jewellery and batik. He must really have been in a hurry! Everything is locked up tight, now. Most of us will be sleeping with one eye open tonight!

## **Day 29: Sat 12/4/75**

None of us slept much last night. I think everyone was feeling the strain of the last couple of days. Anyway, today was an improvement if only because I built a wall... a metaphorical barrier through which I choose to sift my inputs and outputs, and behind which I retreat in times of anguish... a retreat to my own private world where I can find tranquility and peace of mind without the cluttering chaos of everyday hassles. I decided to become my own boss. I'm not going to buggerise around, giving in to other's whims and decisions. I'll make up my own mind using the best information available, and the others can either join in or choose to go their own sweet way. I've been very tolerant lately, but I refuse to become subservient! (This is some diary, this!). ANYHOW, on a more jovial note, I went in to Den Pasar by myself and finally resolved the visa problems... all I need now is a character reference from my losmen owner. This should be no problem since he and I are great friends... we have "language lessons" far into the night. The stamps on the letters from home prove useful here where bribery is an inevitable part of business.

I had a couple of hours to occupy before Imigrasi opened, so I did a few sketches. I'm getting faster now. I wandered randomly around Den Pasar's back streets taking in the sights... people crapping in the gutters, washing cars, trucks and bullocks in the gutters, drying food on mats on the road (kids, dogs, chickens, cars notwithstanding). Very little clothing is worn by most of the poorer people - what they do have is little more than rags anyway. Most of the children "beg", but in a joking, pitiful fashion (hand out, head lowered, large brown eyes begging). The truly degrading beggars are the old people with no family to look after them. They just seem to fade away without even leaving a ripple on the vast ocean of humanity... all very sad and depressing, but such is reality. I actually found Emmink's house, but he was not at home. I left a note, but I somehow think that I shall never see him again. That would be a great pity, but such is the price of this life of "temporary permanence". Inexplicably, I get this feeling of helplessness. The problems of the world seem so real and so magnified when I see, feel, smell and experience the throbbing throngs of humanity so close - exposed by their lack (to my eyes) of social inhibition. Life seems so expendable and cliched... it's hard to do anything "new" when such sheer numbers of people lessen the probability of any "unique" activity! "Western" cultures hide one away - leading us to believe in our own "uniqueness". No-one ever really gets to see into our private lives. Here, there seems to be no privacy. Here you are exposed to the world. Here you feel sameness, not difference. Here there is harmony, not dissent. Here you are forced to ADMIT that you are truly Homo sapiens, not Man! Here beside the copulating pigs, the squabbling dogs, the aggressive fowls and the subsistence living, you must resign yourself not to the dignity of Man, but to the precariousness of your life and its oneness with nature.

How are WE different to those dogs fighting over that putrefied bone in Graham Greene's "Power and Glory"? I find myself reminded of "Lord of the Flies"... I wonder why?

Anyway, where was I? Oh yes, Den Pasar. Visa settled (almost), sketching done, visits made, then back to Kuta and (you guessed it) the beautiful beach. I tried to teach three boys from the losmen (Ediyae, Sudana and Njoman) to surf. Balinese rarely go deeper than their waists! I get on really well with these three. We play badminton, chess and hold language lessons and "chats" well into the night, although jokes and "country comparisons" are the limit of our communication, unfortunately. Sudana keeps buying me pineapples, bananas, biscuits, etc, as a gesture of friendship. We had an astronomy lesson last night. I pointed out many of the constellations and he told me the Balinese names for them. They have completely different names for the stars - much more poetic and all with a story to tell. Some new people (Aussies) moved in. Both are doctors fresh from University. They reminded us of our first days here ... bewildered by toilets, washing, eating, where to go, what to drink, etc. ... we seem like "old hands" to them and it made us realise how much we've learnt. A tiring game of badminton in the coolness of the evening then a welcome feed and a long talk, catching up on all the Aussie news. Vietnam seems to occupy most of the newspapers now. If only we could learn the utter futility of retaliation. I believe more and more now in turning the other cheek... if only as a means of breaking the otherwise endless cycle of revenge. Off to bed to make up for the sleeplessness of last night.

### **Day 30: Sun 13/4/75**

Well, a fine day ... a return to "idyllatory". Chris and Steve went off on a marathon walk to Tanah Lot leaving Christine and me in peace and solitude back at Kuta. I resigned not to go into Den Pasar today. A fantastic early morning swim then a morning spent writing diary, letters, postcards etc. One letter to Glenny got a bit carried away with emotion. I miss her ... waves of intense feeling pass over me more powerful than any generated by Neptune. Later vacillation (will I post it, won't I post it, etc.) convinced me that honesty should prevail - that's how I felt when I wrote it so that's how it must be told. With Christine asleep and everyone else dispersed I had much quiet time to think. A good thing in this case since I need time off every now and then to organise my thoughts - what am I doing, what am I going to do, why am I doing this, etc.

Not only did this process prove enlightening and fruitful, it also made me feel infinitely better - hence the aforementioned vacillation. The afternoon was, therefore, seen through new eyes ... the eyes of a once more happy man. The wave of Glenny-sickness/home-sickness had passed and was now receding. More surfing, sightseeing (showing our new friends around the area), drinking iced fruit drinks (it's still bloody hot), watching the sunset while surfing (to see those towering, watery walls emerging from the inky black surface only to explode around you in a flurry of pink foam is breathtaking) and chatting to the many friends and acquaintances one meets (some dull, some interesting, some incredible) made the afternoon a pleasant fulfilling reprieve. Chris's absence made life a little less strained, I think, but we've all been under pressure so I'll still give him the benefit of the doubt. To cap off this day we needed something special, so we ate at Poppi's Restaurant (good, but a little expensive) so we could contact the student card black marketeers (we need International cards). Here I met Wayan, a Balinese who wanted to show me a "gamelan contest". Not knowing just what this was but keen nonetheless to find that finishing touch to the day, I decided to go with him. Leaving the others we walked about 1 kilometre to a little village where in a large covered area were two gamelan orchestras - each facing the other. Including myself there were only four Europeans present.



There was a panel of a dozen or so judges whose job it was to pick the better orchestra. The contest goes for five days, this being the first night. Amidst the excitement, movement and hilarity of the crowd, a signal was given (a gong) and one of the orchestras would begin its ear splitting rendition of the Ramayana story ... complete with young girls performing the now familiar Ramayana ballet. At the completion of Act 1 the second orchestra would repeat it - same dancers, same "score" but noticeably different timing, tone, style and even volume. Then followed a 10 minute respite while the judges and musicians compared notes ... everyone was looking very serious now. Act 2 is completed similarly with the non-playing orchestra listening to and watching intently the performance of its competition. Similarly Act 3, then all hell broke loose ... Day 1 of the competition was over, then came the festivities... one happy, chaotic, colourful, noisy cacophony of people. Each musician decided to practice a piece of his own choice - whether or not it matched with what the others were playing seemed irrelevant. They were very interested in asking what I thought of it and were over-anxious to invite me back for the rest of the competition. I don't know if my ear drums could stand it. Then, as with all Balinese "happenings", from bemo rides to sunsets, it finished before you knew it and I wound my way blissfully through the star-studded tropical night to seek release into another, less real, dreamland.

### **Day 31: Mon 14/4/75**

Left for Den Pasar early, hopefully for the last time, to finalise my visa renewal ... no hassles, very easy, especially after one of the officials stopped to look and chat while I was sketching a bemo outside Imigrasi. I can now stay in Indonesia until the 17th May - quite comforting. We hope to cash in our tickets soon, however, as we need the money. Then to Poppi's to finalise a deal on a student card. I will pick it up tomorrow. Then to an artist's house not far from Kuta - a guy I met last night told me about it. What a ham this artist is - he is Balinese, middle-aged and a real card. His paintings, however, are fantastic. We watched him do some batik work and the skill and speed with which he could produce a work of art was amazing - as were the prices. A lengthy lunch - made that way by more leisurely chats with fellow travelers. Getting to meet someone "on the road" is a very easy task - almost all taboos and inhibitions regarding the meeting of people are broken down, since traveling (especially on the cheap) gives one a license to open conversation with virtually anyone without any worry. We then purchased our bus tickets to Surabaya. We leave on Thursday morning. I spent the rest of the day on the beach - again! We all feel that it is time to move on. Bali is a wonderful place but there is much more in this huge world to see and do. It has become too easy to fall into the daily pattern of life exhibited by ourselves this last week. I have tended towards lethargy - a delightful feeling sometimes but not so good knowing that most of our travels are still ahead of us.

After an incredible fish meal we again saw activity in the place where the girls were being taught how to dance. This time it was the same teacher but a different subject ... he was masterfully conducting, arranging and training a complete gamelan orchestra. He could play every instrument superbly - even facing backwards! He could also remember every single beat for the most complicated rhythms I've ever heard. He obviously commanded the utmost respect and attention from his youthful pupils - and they were good! It really was exciting to hear this music that has been handed down unwritten for centuries. The range and capabilities of each instrument employed to their limits by this omni-talented guy was fascinating to observe. A quick sketch of the "moonset" and home to bed.





### **Day 32: Tue 15/4/75**

More or less a replay of yesterday. The temperature for the last few days has been very high ... I am now more brown than some of the Balinese! All my acne has cleared up, my beard is now quite long and I'm feeling very healthy indeed. Amid much cloak and dagger intrigue I picked up my forged student card at Poppi's. It cost \$5. Today is the Balinese equivalent of Christmas ... three days of holidays, eating, visiting relatives and friends etc. ... they love it! Whereas the Australian equivalent is more or less a family affair, here the whole community partakes. While the two Chris's were in Den Pasar finalising their immigration hassles I spent an enlightening morning walking around nearby villages and beaches observing all the "goings on". Everyone was in their best clothes (which, unfortunately, to many meant Western clothes) feasting, playing music, making offerings, and decorating their temples. Many houses have colourful decorations and wherever there is even only the smallest of temples or pagodas they are shrouded in the ever useful black and white checked sarongs, topped by beautiful little offerings. Unfortunately most of the celebrations are private and those that are not just look like all the others I've seen only with less obvious significance. The meanings of much of what they do are lost on me - a person ignorant of many of the intricacies of a very intricate religion. I suspect that in order to fully appreciate all of this I would need to be a Hindu!

Another afternoon on the beach - it was magnificent! A meal of frog's legs (incredible - 40c!) then a quiet lonesome walk on the night-shrouded, star-spangled, hiss-hushed beach, interrupted only by the distant lights of Kuta and the compensating gentle strumming of a meditative guitar played by a faceless friend-of-the-night. No words passed between us as we sat together searching the heavens and oceans for who knows what. Partners in peace. Unfortunately the beach is a local pick-up for the young Balinese girls ... "500 Rps short time ... good pucking!". Some of them are so young yet so hard. I feel very sorry for them and angry with the way life forces them to sell themselves as playthings for the "rich, white guys" who readily take advantage of them. I'm not knocking prostitution - it serves a vital role in most societies. I am knocking the way it is generally sold - not only here but in most of the world. Thus endeth another day.

### **Day 33: Wed 16/4/75**

Most shops etc. shut because of the holiday. I was up early again, another day spent alternating between the bliss of the beach and that of the Ice Juice bar. The whole world and both his dogs seemed to be on Kuta Beach today, all decked out like you wouldn't believe, yet very few venturing beyond their knees in the surf - and I don't blame them. The surf was the biggest and strongest I've seen for many a year ... at least 8' and dumping solidly. Steve nearly got killed (literally!) as we both attempted to swim beyond the breaker line. We were a good distance from shore with no hope of standing and the waves just kept on coming. They were stirring up the sand at a depth of about 10' - which gives you some idea of their strength. We were the only two mad enough to swim out ... Steve gave up, or rather was forced into submission, leaving me to my frothy doom. No, I didn't catch one but it was very nearly vice versa several times!

After all that expenditure of energy and adrenalin a well-deserved meal was in order but with most places shut we all had to settle for a crowded overworked restaurant alongside the most unbelievable noise-producing machine ever invented. The Balinese like their music loud and distorted. Well this was worse - a comedy/musical tape played over and over on a PA system that would drown out a 747 at take-off! Worse still, we couldn't even understand it. What with straining to make ourselves heard over the racket and coping with the chaotic food service it made for a riotous meal. Everyone was happy to the point of hysteria. This was a great note on which to end our last day in Bali for tomorrow we venture forth into the land of Allah (Java), leaving this most beautiful paradise behind. Our sad goodbyes said, we all hit the sack in preparation for our 4 am rise tomorrow to catch the bus. I've said it before but I'll say it again ... the traveler must learn quickly that most of the people he will meet will never cross his path again. Those whom he wishes to befriend and/or know better necessarily become part of an irretrievable past. I'm not sure if my wish for deeper relationships can ever be fulfilled whilst living such a nomadic way of life. It, like the language problem, is one of the bugbears of this traveling gig!

PS. The mask dance was to be performed by world famous actors and actresses right here in Kuta - a once-in-a-lifetime experience. But my attendance at same was foreshortened by (1) tiredness, (2) a need for early rising and (3) cancellation due to rain. Unfortunate, but all those gods present in these plays are helpless in controlling such a simple thing as the weather!

## Java

### **Day 34: Thu 17/4/75**

(Struth, 34 days!)

Well, we're finally on the move again ... 4am start into Den Pasar, climb aboard a Mercedes bus at 6am. We managed to get good seats near windows ready to absorb the sights. We wound our way through the green ruggedness of Western Bali. The road follows the coast for much of the way - flanked on our right by towering volcanoes mostly with their heights kept secret by a fine mist which shone brilliantly in the tropical sunlight. The Balinese countryside has to be the most beautiful in the world. It's hard to believe how many different shades of green are possible. Most of the sand on this coast is black - reflecting the volcanic origins of this once fiery land. This was the coast which bore the pounding waves generated in 1901 by the enormous explosion of Krakatoa. The serenity of this shore now hides from us the destructive ferocity of Mother Earth but the activity of the many nearby live volcanoes is a constant reminder of our precarious place on this planet. Bali's beauty is but a drop in the ocean of time and space - a most beautiful drop, but is it not true that the beauty of a rainbow is merely the total of many ordinary drops made devastatingly beautiful by the addition of the merest pinch of sunlight?

Anyway, as usual, I diverge! At Gilmanuk we loaded ourselves (bus and all) onto a ferry. What with delays, diversions, currents, ineptitude of crew and the mismanagement of the docking procedure, the crossing to Java which should have taken 25 minutes took 3 and a half hours! Not bad, however, by Javanese standards. Then a 6 hour trip to Surabaya. The country in Java is very different from beautiful little Bali. In many parts it is so homogenous that it resembles a wasteland. Rice, tea, cotton, wood, rubber, all grow in land that has seen the same foliage for centuries. Most villages are very poor with beggars hounding us for money through the bus windows. The old ladies were the most pitiful of all ... their scrawny palms thrust their way through the half open windows searching the air for a gift. Strangely though I have no desire to give them money. That may sound harsh so an attempt at justification is necessary: sure, if positions were reversed, I would appreciate some monetary help. But to give money to one or even a few of them would not alter the causes of their predicament one iota - maybe just extend their agonising lifetime just a little. The predominant feeling of human expendability here is overwhelming and you find yourself asking "would it make much difference?" You find the answer in the slums and gutters of the world. That answer is expressed not in the money one can give but in the principle of natural selection which I can see more and more governs all things in this infinity of time and space we call the universe. Certainly it

seems unfair but is it unfair for a cat to catch a mouse, a dog to catch a cat, a man to shoot a dog or poverty to consume a man? Fairness and justice are two words to which can be attached tags which only approximate their meaning - no such concepts exist. Shit, yet again I diverge ...

Now, where was I? Ah, yes .. driving up the coast of Java, through towns dirty, filthy and poor. The fishing villages had little or none of the pride evident in Bali regarding the upkeep and building of their boats ... all were poorly constructed and maintenance was abysmally minimal. No more Hindu temples to be seen - such a contrast of religious influence. Bali is beautiful to entice the gods to remain. Beauty is in the Balinese religion. Religion is the Balinese livelihood. In Java, as in Christian countries, religion is secondary to materialism - even the mosques are more conservative and efficient in the use of space. Balinese temples were built first for the gods and then for the people. Javanese temples are built for the people first. The mountains are rugged, their volcanic origin obvious by their modified conical shapes. We saw sugar cane for the first time. I wonder why there is none in Bali? Everything here is relatively expensive - it cost 25 Rps to go to the toilet! The Javanese are not so quick to smile. They are more supercilious towards white men. Some are even verbally aggressive.

We arrived at Surabaya at 6.30pm, checking into the Bamboo Den - an incredible hostel-like place. We rode from the bus station in a betchak - a strange 3-wheeled pedal-driven machine. They seem highly efficient and quiet with no pollution - ideal for flat areas. The "drivers" certainly earn their money, though. English classes are held in the front section of the Bamboo Den - we walked through the middle of three such classes. English is held in great esteem for its value as a useful earning tool in later years. Not many Javanese speak English - there are very few tourists in Surabaya. A walk around the night-shrouded incandescent lit city revealed a noticeable Western influence. Apart from the differences in traffic, people, language and food you could easily imagine yourself in Crows Nest or Dee Why. Quite a change from Bali, quite a change! It gave me a strange feeling of comfort to once again be surrounded by familiar places, shops, lights, noises, products and clothes. They reminded me very much of home.

Even so, this is a fairly poor city - an industrial centre of East Java, and poverty and sickness hide in every little niche they can find. As you walk down the streets you literally trip over people riddled with disease sleeping in the gutters in little more than rags. The betchak drivers literally live in their vehicles. The facade of civilisation is very thin, readily revealing to any probing eye the reality of "unfairness". You couldn't help but think how lucky you are ... what chance, really, has some poor bugger born into one of the poorer villages we've seen? The surprising thing about it all, however, is how little guilt I feel for my advantages ... that's life and I am as much a part of it as each of these people. Survival of the fittest is the law of the universe - it is

neither cruel nor unfair, it just is! In some aspects of life (certainly not all) I am considered more "fit" than others. In other aspects I am most certainly "unfit". This also is good, for that is the way reality has shaped our lives and is there really anything that is not good if reality is obeyed?

### **Day 35: Fri 18/4/75**

A great day, beginning with early morning discussions with others at the losmen, then walking into town for banking, travel info, etc. At the bank I became friendly with a teller who showed me half a million dollars in counterfeit money. He also showed me how to tell real from counterfeit... I only wish it were that easy to tell people apart! I am forced to retract much of what I said yesterday concerning the friendliness of these people... they have mostly proved to be EXCEPTIONALLY friendly. Generally speaking, they seem to be more generous and helpful than most Balinese. Just shows how first impressions can be very misleading. Before we left the Bamboo Den, I was invited by an English language teacher to take her class for a while... probably since she saw how interested I was, standing at the back of her class, observing. One valuable thing that my small amount of teaching experience has taught me is not to be self-conscious in front of such a group of 40 or so strangers. My "lesson" went for about 30 minutes, asking and answering questions in my slowest of slow English. We all got on remarkably well, and many of the students swapped addresses with me with the promise of further communication - maybe. It was all an enlightening experience, and, as with most worthwhile experiences, it happened quite spontaneously.

I was pleased that my teaching came so naturally... I feel myself becoming much more self-confident in situations in which previously I would have been a gibbering wreck. I can feel myself progressing! Feeling good, we ventured into the main street. It looked just like Warringah Mall! In contrast to the poorer parts of town, here I was impressed with the cleanliness, friendliness and courtesy of the people. The range of wealth is astounding... one of "my" pupils was the daughter of an engineer, living in an enormous house with TV and a pool, two chauffeured cars, servants, etc. Outside her fence I saw a beggar with elephantiasis, who was no doubt wearing all of his worldly possessions! We all felt comfortable in the more familiar surroundings... but the differences were not far below the surface - the attitudes of the people, the methods of locomotion, the lack of social services, the lack of public housing, etc. We made our way to the largest, and possibly the best, zoo in SE Asia. It was more like a cross between a Natural History museum and a zoo. Taronga could certainly learn something from the way the present their animals - especially the tropical fish. Unbelievable! Tropical environments certainly allow evolution to follow some tortuous paths. The variety of life is mind-boggling. Most of these animals I have never even heard of, let alone seen before! I was very impressed also with the "natural" surroundings for the indigenous primates. It really seemed to encourage them to show off their true colourings, habits, behaviours, etc. I was learning a lot. The Toucans were the epitome of evolution-gone-wild... huge cumbersome beaks challenging us to think of a reason for their being that way. A truly exotic example of Natural Selection not necessarily favouring

the desirable, but only of NOT favouring the undesirable. The relatively easy life of a tropical animal makes it possible for the weird varieties to survive, that in harsher climes would quickly perish.

More enjoyable betchak rides took us home, then out again for a delicious, well-deserved but expensive meal. We then walked for miles into the night. Past the filthy beggars asleep in the gutters, past the stall-keepers asleep on the paths, past the itinerant unemployed asleep in doorways, through the night markets and the slime and the rats and the rabid dogs. Stepping over small bundles of rags hiding even more pitiful bundles of human beings, seeking any shelter they can from the inevitable rain. Depressing as this may sound, our efforts at communication led to some hilarious moments. Even surrounded by all of this poverty, these people are still rich when it comes to smiles and laughter! Of course, we got lost, but eventually reached home, to sleep like the proverbial log, anticipating an early morning tomorrow. (I'm sorry about the confusion of tenses, but there are no tenses in Indonesian). On our walk through the town, we passed several "Peoples Parks", set up by the government to entertain and amuse the populace... probably to suppress revolution if the truth were ever known! Everything in these parks was free - entertainment, dancing, rides, food stalls, side-shows, opera, bands, etc. All quite incredible, but none of it was as lively as we expected, probably due to the pouring rain!

### **Day 36: Sat 19/4/75**

Awake at 4am (again!). However the train was full and the next train's departure uncertain due to floods, so we decided to leave by bus. At 6am we boarded a rattling, crowded, mobile sauna bath otherwise called a local bus, and rattled off westwards. The "6 hour" journey took 9, because of the aforementioned floods. Once again I am forced to revise my impressions of Java... apart from the wall-to-wall poverty, the country really is quite beautiful. It is much more varied in its industry, crops, topography, etc. than Bali, but not as ordered in its layout. Not once in the long journey did we escape humanity... "ribbon development" at its best (or worse!). Most of the villages were flooded, mostly consisting of mud-caked, dilapidated hovels. They all looked so much alike, and tended to merge into one immensely long village. Each one was dirty, with little more than a main street in which the inevitable beggars and peddlers vied for the odd scrap of money carried by us tourists.

Amid all of this poverty, one bus station (at Solo) stood out as worse than any of the others... People just pissed or crapped wherever they liked, and no-one attempted to clean it up. It was beyond filth! The food was exposed and handled by everyone. The stench was so indescribable that the driver sprayed the bus with perfume in a vain attempt to disguise the stink. Disease was obviously rampant in this god-forsaken town. And the noise of people, buses, horns, screaming kids and touting betchak drivers was so constant and annoying that when the bus finally pulled out, we all heaved a great sigh of relief and sucked in the relatively clean air once more.

We're lucky we took the bus... the railway line is blocked, but the road only nearly so. I'm glad my Indonesian is improving since very few seem to understand English. I was hoping for some mountain scenery, but all we saw was plain after plain of very plain plains! (The rain in Java falls mainly on the plains). We arrived in Jogjakarta at 3pm, wandered around comparing losmens. We eventually chose the "Hotel Indonesia"... an imposing name for a place that costs 40c a night! But then, everything seems very cheap here. Wary of first impressions, now, but still forming them nonetheless, I notice that this town is a little dirtier, less industrialised, more populous and poorer than Surabaya. The people, however, are just as friendly, non-pushy, helpful and courteous. A very pleasant change from the houndings of Balinese peddlers. After a quick look around, we ate at Mama's (where 40c will "fill you up"), and returned to the losmen. My brain is once again abuzz with impressions... I have to struggle to get them into some sort of order. My catalogue system doesn't even have headings for some of the things I'm experiencing!



### **Day 37: Sun 20/4/75**

Another of those great days when everything just seems to fall into place. Jogja is a fabulous town! It is made that way, not by its guttered, clean streets, nor by its fascinating shops and markets, nor by its obvious history. It is great because of its people. Everyone we've met has gone out of their way to try and please us. For example, as we walked down the main street we were NOT hassled by anyone, even the betchak drivers, after money. Instead, many of the young people invited us to help them "practice their English". Many of them can speak English quite well indeed... they seem to take their education very seriously here.

On reaching the Sultan's Palace, the three of us were taken on a guided tour by one of the Sultan's Special Guards. He made sure that we noticed the large Kris knife in his belt. He was a quiet Moslem gentleman ("I am 58 years", he proudly told us), who spoke English as the Indians do... very fast and clipped, but just understandable. Jogja is one of the few remaining Sultanates in Indonesia. This Sultan (Number 9) is the Vice President of Indonesia. His palace looks like it has just materialised out of the pages of a fairy story - the vivid colours, the intricate carvings, the superb workmanship and the artifacts from all over the world (marble, glass, silver, porcelain, etc), all add to the magic of this place. The whole shebang must be worth a fortune. Everywhere you look you spy yet another work of art... here an immense portrait, there an antique clock, and over there a gold-framed French mirror. The palace was first built in the 16th century, but has seen many renovations and additions since then - the latest being in the 1930's. Every room contains its own history and its own taboos... the whole place is closely linked to the mixture of Hindu, Islam and Buddhism that forms the strange concoction of religion from whence much of this society's culture derives. All the sacred scripts, etc, are in Sanskrit. You have to crawl across certain areas, in order to remain lower than the Sultan... even the doors are only 4' high, so you HAVE to bow when entering a room! There are even areas "caged off" so no-one but the Sultan can sit there. Although he is the supreme law maker and ruler of this area, he is rarely present these days.

We were lucky enough to see the daily dance practice performed by young men and women chosen at the age of 12 to be trained for nothing else than to dance for the Sultan. They adorn his palace just like the carvings and the peacocks! The orchestra is similar to the Balinese gamelan, but played much more quietly and sedately. Sometimes it even sounded quite morbid, but always soulful and meditative. The women danced first, crawling onto the stage before beginning the slowest, most graceful precision dancing I have ever seen. They were completely absorbed by the music and the movements. I sat spellbound, entranced by the subtlety and beauty of every single eye and finger movement... all performed in slow motion in perfect time with the

chanting of the old women standing behind them. All the time the "teachers" moved amongst the dancers, making small but firm corrections to their almost faultless movements. Gracefully, slowly, the dance came to a quiet finish, unlike the suddenness with which the boisterous Balinese climax their dances. After the women crawled off, bowing and scraping to their invisible god-sultan, the men took their turn. Their dancing was more like slow-motion acrobatics - their grossly exaggerated walking movements and pseudo-defensive and attacking motions were most beautiful to watch. Though the dancing was slow, the tremendous exertion, especially when trying to hold some contorted stationary position, was enough to produce copious amounts of perspiration on all of the dancers.

Afterwards, a student friend whom I had met earlier took us to the bird markets, where all sorts of colourful, exotic display birds, or fat, tasty birds, or small, dainty companion birds, or large talking birds could be bought, sold or swapped. We then made our way to the Water Castle, an ancient (1521) castle previously built in the centre of a man-made lake by Sultan Number 1. It now remains in ruins - mainly caused by an 18th century earthquake which also drained the lake. The remnants of this structure, however, are enough to show how magnificent and elegant it must once have been - the underground tunnels, the swimming pools, the enormous towers, the mighty mosaics all stand as testimony to one who sought immortality and who, like the rest of us, did not find it!

Where the lake once existed now stand hundreds of batik shops. The whole population here seems to be born with art in their blood. I am very tempted to part with some money in exchange for one or two of their fantastic paintings. The amount of work that goes in to producing one of these artworks is astounding. We witnessed all of the stages from drawing the design, through the waxing and dying processes to the finishing touches. A painting taking, say, 3 weeks would sell for about \$12Aus. Where else could such artistic skill come so cheaply? I feel so inadequate surrounded by so much skill... here am I, 23 years of education yet unable to point to anything creative or constructive that I have done that even comes close to what these people produce every day! There is so much to see and do here, that to record what I've seen and done in this one day would fill an encyclopedia. All I can wish for is that my impressions of this day will linger in my memory. Impressions such as the contemporary and traditional art works, side by side; the helpful, happy people; the interesting art patrons, providing sales outlets for their "students"; the twisting, sinuous tracks winding between the many shops and stalls in the shadow of the towering castle walls; the ever-present, though oft-ignored beggars amid the opulence of the gold and silverware shops. All these images swirl around in my brain as a whirlpool of pleasant, interesting experiences.

From here we wound our way back to the main street, where I spent some time with some Javanese architecture students sketching buildings for a project. We had an hilarious time, attracting a milling throng of interested onlookers as we attempted to communicate. Eventually we got to eat - cheap and excellent food, here, then we spent the afternoon walking, walking, walking - through markets, stores, back-streets, community halls, etc. Too much to hope to absorb it all at once. I met an interesting guy who runs the Batik Research Centre. He took us to his home and treated us to a feast of "batik culture". He was a true traditionalist that insisted that his students learn the "old methods" before they even attempt the more contemporary works. After chatting with him and his family for several hours, we eventually rode one of those oh-so-romantic betchaks home to a welcome bed. What a day!

### **Day 38: Mon 21/4/75**

And yet another fascinating day. I spent much of the morning talking with various people at the losmen... They seem to come from every corner of the globe, possessing every kind of philosophy imaginable. One guy in particular (also called Chris) was one with whom I felt an immediate affiliation. His background is just like an American version of my own. We talked for hours about the flora and fauna of Asia and the reasons for the incredible diversity. I, of course, couldn't help but quote my pet theory, and was so surprised to have him agree! What a pity that he has to leave this afternoon. Another guy (David) provided me with a "sailing for fun and profit" conversation. He reckons that to get paid work on a yacht in the Mediterranean is easy if you convince them that you have experience. He was in his late 30's and has traveled all of his life. He has no "tomorrows", no ties, no restrictions and few plans. He does what spontaneity suggests and seems to be a very happy man.

As much as I envy him his freedom, I don't think that I could cope with not having anything permanent in my life... such as close friendships or family ties. There would be times when the sheer guilt of my selfishness would detract from any freedom-given pleasures I was experiencing. As if to prove my point, he was a very egocentric, cock-sure, selfish type of person - like Brian, always right, never unsure or wrong! There have been many others I've met and talked with on this trip, but most of them can be placed into generalised categories - especially the girls. Many seem to be "prowling" for husbands and present quite a challenge to engage in serious conversation without bucket loads of trivia entering into the conversation. Of course, there are exceptions and many of the men are equally absorbed by trivia, but the trait seems more common among women. I have a few theories as to why this is so, but space prohibits me from presenting them here. Anyway, I dislike classifying people because each is an individual who can never be the same as another, but in certain aspects where there are similarities a restricted classification is helpful when you have to sum people up so quickly. Again I rave...

No letters at the Post Office. Disappointing, though I don't need letters to tell me that the people I love are thinking of me, so no worries. We hired pushbikes for the afternoon and rode to Kotagede, a silversmith just outside of town. Fascinating to see, but not my kind of thing. The work that goes into their special filigree work is incredible and again their extensive skill made me only too aware of my own limitations. I rode back to town (on a flat tyre!) and then made thorough use of the bike's mobility in touring through all the markets, shops, backstreets, etc. that perambulation alone would not easily allow. Riding through a tropical downpour has to be one of life's great pleasures!

Nightfall finds my bicycling companions resting their aching legs, but my life is too short to waste on such necessities... so into the Palace Gardens for an evening of Javanese culture. Into this huge bamboo and thatch "shed" (over 500'x100'x100') where every night the local drama group presents operas or plays from various regions of Java - both local and distant. I got there early but watched a real clown of a man sell his "miracle hormone tablets". He had us all in stitches as he prattled ceaselessly in Javanese. A young student introduced himself politely to me (Ahmed) and helpfully and patiently explained to me what was going on. He then agreed to accompany me to the ballet and drama to explain it all. Of course there was no question of payment - after all, this is Jogja, not Kuta! These kids offer their services merely to practice their English, and their natural hospitality and politeness is a pleasure to experience. I wonder how they would view us uncouth Aussies if ever they were to visit Australia? They must think us extremely self-centred, intolerant, inhibited and rude. In my mind I often try to transpose positions with these people and feel a little ashamed of MY cultural and ethical background!

Eventually we were seated and the program began: Firstly the orchestra began its slow, rhythmic, haunting music, followed by a "group dance" similar to the one I saw being practiced yesterday. This one, however, was even more spellbinding, done by professionals in full costume and complete with lighting effects. Then a Javanese version of part of the Ramayana story. It was a completely different interpretation to the Balinese version... much more subtle movements, with an emphasis on the precision of timing of the four dancers. The "special effects" were faultless and the audience was quick to show its appreciation! Then came the "opera". It was a complex plot with characters entering and leaving the stage in confusing profusion. Music, song, comedy, drama, action, love, fighting, etc, all combined to yield a well acted and presented play, apparently changed little since it was first presented centuries ago. The backgrounds, lighting and sound effects were equal to any I've ever seen, and even though the dialogue was in a local dialect of Javanese I could still follow the quickly thickening plot with the help of Ahmed's interpretations. Even so, much of the subtlety was obviously lost on me as the audience laughed or gasped at times while I sat bewildered. But I enjoyed it thoroughly, nonetheless. Some of the people in the audience seemed to get a great kick out of seeing me - the only European in the place - amongst them, enjoying part of their rapidly vanishing culture, and were very interested in my opinion, especially of the opera. I had to try hard to convince them that I really DID enjoy it. The walk home through the midnight rain was a perfect ending to a perfect day!

### **Day 39: Tue 22/4/75**

An 8 o'clock start with ominous sore throat feelings. I made my way to the Post Office to post letters and hopefully to receive same. No luck with the latter, very disappointing. Then a long walk to the bus station, through the "seedier" parts of town. We hop on yet another mobile sauna heading for Prambenan temple. The roads are under repair following the heavy rains, so we take the "detour"... through narrow, dirty streets, past outlying villages that had never seen so much traffic, past trucks and buses bogged in thick, sticky mud. At least the detour provided an unexpected view of another side of Jogja. Prambenan is a 9th century temple, now completely restored. In the 12th century it was inexplicably abandoned to the elements, earthquakes and, more recently, Man's road building needs. It was rediscovered and reconstructed only since 1885. Of the original 240 temples, only 6 have now been restored.



The largest is truly immense - over 150' high - and the carvings on its stonework are unbelievable. They all seem to tell a story from the ancient Civa Hindu culture that built it. The grandeur of this place is truly awesome, and it is difficult to stand amid the fallen stones and not be transported back

to the time when this dilapidated rockpile was the focus for the beliefs and rituals of thousands of devotees. I met one of the German archaeologists supervising the reconstruction. He was most helpful in answering my incessant queries - enough to tell me that what remains unknown still far outweighs what is known! I couldn't help thinking what a mind like Michener's could do with a place like this - I kept wondering who it was that actually chipped away at this or that piece of rock 10,000 years ago... what was his motivation, was he a true believer, was it merely another "job" to him? So many questions. So few answers. Still, that's no reason to give up searching!

Another sardine-like trip home with a worsening throat. On my advice, Chris went to the Drama, leaving Christine, myself and Laurie (a recently met friend) to our own whimsical devices. We had a riotous time with the people in Helen's Restaurant, joking in "Indolish" and charades, feeling no inhibitions, really enjoying every moment. One of the waitresses (Reny) spent most of her time at our table, exploding now and then into fits of uncontrolled hysteria. These people are so happy and friendly that superlatives aren't enough to describe them. What they must think of us "Aussie morons" if ever they were to visit our shores makes me shudder. A late night enjoying the tropical warmth of a Jogja nighttime, then to bed, anticipating the inevitable onset of 'flu tomorrow!

**Day 40: Wed 23/4/75**

Well, I was right. The Chrises went to Borobodur while I lay on my death bed... Damned tonsils. I could sure do without them complicating my life! I was as sick as a Balinese dog all day long, hardly caring about the multitude of fauna sharing my bed with me...

### **Day 41: Thu 24/4/75**

Another day wasted through the ravages of some foreign virus... I was really quite crook with a high fever and wild dreams for most of the day. At least the hallucinations added some interest to an otherwise dull day. Who needs mushroom omelettes when you can have influenza? In the afternoon I at last had a good, intelligent talk with Chris - in spite of (or perhaps because of) my delirium. He really does have a lot of good in him. He thinks of others often to his own detriment, and he really does love Peta. I've made up my mind now to make my way home from Singapore or Bangkok for several reasons:

1) I miss all those people and things familiar to my life that enables me to call Australia my home - friends, bike riding, sailing, Sunday lunches at Helen's, visits to Yamba, family dramas, camping trips, etc.

2) I now am convinced that without LOVE I may as well not exist. To love and to be loved is the essence of life. There are only a few people in my life with whom I can share that aspect of life, so what am I doing here with all of them back in Australia?

3) Traveling alone is a real drag. Relationships are so temporary "on the road". I am in real need of closeness with someone. Why not travel with Glenny in the near future? I would feel far more complete and satisfied with that arrangement.

4) One of the aims of this trip was to "see what this traveling life was like". I've experienced enough and met enough people who have lived this kind of life to have a fair concept of it. I do like the freedoms and the mobility, but the price of impermanent relationships that must be paid is too high. My outlook has broadened, my perspective widened, my conceptual framework rebuilt. My tolerance level has definitely increased while my concepts of normality, etc, have altered dramatically. All of these changes can only be for the better. Having learnt all this about myself so far, prolonging the journey seems less necessary. I am sure that Glenny and I would get even more out of traveling together.

5) Economically, I would not like to land back in Australia with nothing, because I would then limit my alternatives regarding employment. At least with some money behind me I could afford to try a few alternative jobs without fear of "breadlining" myself. I'm sick of "absorbing" all of my life. I'd like a chance to USE the information and ideas I have stored in my cranium. I have some ideas that I'd like to try in the field of education but this life I'm now leading makes me feel a little guilty since it seems so self-centred. Who is gaining but me?

6) I also miss my music and my books!

Do you think I've convinced myself yet?

See, this is how an addled, sick-brained patient thinks between (or was it during?) bouts of delirium. Anyway, those were my thoughts and it would be dishonest of me to present them otherwise.

Thus endeth the 41st gospel according to the fevered brain of Kevinus Brutus.

## **Day 42: Fri 25/4/75**

(6 weeks!)

Amid coughing, spluttering, sniffing and generally feeling crook, I "valiantly" struggled to maintain a semi-vertical orientation for most of the day. I managed to wash most of the bed-bugs off me, then had a rest. I then struggled into town for the first decent meal in two whole days, then another rest. Laurie and I then headed out of town to try and find a Wayang Kulitt (shadow puppet) show about which we had heard from someone at the hotel. One and a half hours, and many miles later we found it... it was easy - "follow this road, turn 1st right, 2nd left, left along the railway track, miss two turn-offs, next right until you meet the creek, left, across the bridge, turn right and you can't miss it." We didn't!

Once again, the story was as told centuries ago, with virtually all aspects of Javanese culture represented in the one performance... carving, visual art, dancing, music (there was a gamelan and string accompaniment), literature and drama. You could see both in front of and behind the white screen. On one side you could witness the deftness and expertise of the 'dalang' (puppeteer) as he manipulated the exquisitely carved and constructed puppets, while the other side showed you the shadows cast by the strong lamp. This side was the best side to view the play since objects, faces and scenes could just materialise or disappear from the screen as if by magic. The dalang is exceptionally skilled - he is both narrator, puppeteer, prop man, conductor and musician... he plays cymbals and drums with his feet! Too bugged to walk home, we took a betcak and I soon collapsed into bed feeling sicker than a Balinese dog... and boy, is that sick!

### **Day 43: Sat 26/4/75**

A great day at last! Feeling better, but still with a blocked head, I was determined to enjoy my first day of relative well-being. Laurie and I hired a motorbike and headed for Borobodur Temple - a huge 9th Century Buddhist temple, also partly destroyed, also in the process of restoration. It is a magnificent feat of architecture, even though much of it is concealed behind the cranes and bulldozers belonging to the army of restorers. I could easily imagine the hundreds of Javanese labouring under the hot 9th Century tropical sun carving the gigantic stone blocks of which it is built. The whole structure is arranged in a series of tiers... the lowest containing uncovered Buddhas, representing our exposure to "wordly" things. As you ascend, the statues become progressively more and more concealed until you reach the summit where the statue is completely hidden from view... and from "wordly" desires. It is totally enclosed inside a stone dome.

The carvings near the summit are much less encumbered with the detail which we saw at the lower levels... they were more concerned with designs and aesthetics, rather than the lower level depictions of more "practical" concerns. The entire concept is grand and huge... set in a most picturesque green valley, flanked on three sides by terraced cliffs and on the fourth, at some distance, by an enormous volcano. What a sight! The temple was alive with Javanese students on an excursion. They all seemed to want their pictures taken with us. Great fun and games were had by us all! On the other hand, the beggars that lined the temple steps were a pitiful spectacle. Most of them were defective in some way - usually blind or grotesquely deformed. Once again I was overwhelmed by this feeling of hopelessness. There are so many and I am but one person. I occasionally give, but I know not why.



We rode on through the occasional rain squall (great for the flu!) and ascend as far as possible up the aforementioned volcano, the poor old bike beneath us struggling under the load. Actually it is a twin volcano, called Merapi and Merbabu, with one of the cones being well formed, still fuming, very steep and foreboding. The sheer enormity of this mountain is enough to instill awe (and not a little fear) when you realise that these huge boulders all around us

were carried there not by water, but propelled through the air by the tremendous forces that now lie concealed beneath this simmering cone. Up here we are in bright sunshine. In the valley below we can see the rain sweeping over the green fields. So, preparing ourselves for an inevitable soaking, we descend the slippery path and turn once more to Jogja. Here we eat lunch and wait for the worst of the rain to pass.

Then we headed south to Samas, Jogja's resort area. This is a black sand, windswept, barren coast confronting the ferocity of a most-times disturbed ocean. Here we encounter our student friends again. We had much fun swapping addresses and stories. As the afternoon light started to fade, we decided to head for Jogja. No go. The thrashing up the volcano had taken its toll on the poor little bike. However, after a quick mechanical adjustment - actually the removal of molten metal from the spark plug - we were off. Well, sort of. A dozen more stops for similar "minor repairs" turned the half hour trip into a two hour marathon. Finally we limped into Jogja, taking the shorter route the wrong way up a one way street, amid enormous hilarity, with sparks, smoke, thumps and jerking spasmic explosions emanating from within the long-suffering motorbike. The last hundred yards or so saw us surrounded by amused spectators anxious to witness the raucous demise of our little Yamaha. Many came running from deep inside their houses and shops to investigate the frightening noise. Laurie and I nearly fell off, racked with laughter at the spectacle. Just as we rolled up to the hire shop the little two stroke engine gave one last almighty explosion and expired beneath the faint red glow of molten aluminium... much to the irate amazement of the owner. Barely recovering our composure, we staggered back to the losmen, soaked, filthy, bruised from the innumerable crashes in the sand, and tired. We were, however, more than pleased to have the monotony of the previous few days broken at last.

The sight of the more-usually-solemn-than-not Chrisses led me to decide then and there that the trio should split. Not that I dislike their company, just that they seem too involved with triviality and self-interest to add anything much more to my voyage of discovery. They will leave in the morning. I will stay on for a few more days and then follow them to Jakarta with Laurie. He and I get on exceptionally well... sharing similar philosophies and outlooks. Both of us willing to alter our paths at the last minute in order to make the most of our too-short lifetimes. Even though both of us were still pretty sick, we laughed our way through a day that for the two Chrisses would have been unbearable. ("I'm worried about your cold in that rain, Kevin.") Besides, we neither make demands on nor have expectations of one another. What more could I ask for!

### **Day 44: Sun 27/4/75**

The two Chrisses departed amid their usual worries, dramas and "what-if's", at 5am, leaving us to wallow in the bliss of a Sunday morning doing whatever I please... and what I pleased to do was absolutely NOTHING. A day of rest it was intended to be, and a day of rest it was. Writing the diary and a few letters, talking quietly to Laurie and others as we watched our clothes dry, occupied most of the morning. I was still feeling the effects of yesterday's exertion. The afternoon found us doing a "milk-bar crawl", enjoying the liquid delights of various establishments, talking with anyone who wanted to listen, sheltering quietly from the tropical sun and the unbelievable humidity. Such laziness, however, was not to last. After a series of complicated coincidences we found ourselves on a tennis court (of all things), punctuating our coughs, sniffles and wheezes with the whack! thwat! ping! of the ball as it made infrequent contact with various parts of our racquets. There we were, challenged to a match by a couple of Indonesian guys who were both very proficient as evidenced by the thrashing they gave us in the first two games. However, we fought back valiantly to actually win, 6-0! Of course, the truth is that they were obviously going to be embarrassed by insulting us with their prowess that they deliberately threw the game. They're like that here in this hospitable country. A great time was had by all... we laughed so much that we completely forgot our illnesses. We were overcome with the friendliness and acceptance of these people and we easily came to realise how sport can be a universal language. The heavens opened once more, thankfully providing us with an excuse not to further expose our inadequacies on the tennis court. We sought shelter in "Helen's", where we enjoyed an enormous Javanese meal then home... happy and content with this wonderful life...

### **Day 45: Mon 28/4/75**

Another day spent with Laurie, both still recovering, so taking it easy. Morning spent hassling Garuda re refund of tickets, possibility of credit, etc. Not much luck. Have to wait 'til Jakarta. Then on to the Water Castle to view a batik "factory" where every single step connected with the manufacture of all kinds of batik cloth was shown to us - between bouts of free ice juices. To see them making the copper stamps used in the reproduction of complex repetitive patterns was really an eye-opener to the incredible patience that some people can possess. It literally takes days to make one small stamp. Every process is done totally by hand. No smelly, noisy machines here!

After much thoughtful comparison, bargaining and ice juices, Laurie and I both purchased some interesting batik - to be taken home, not sent via this dubious mail system. Back to Jogja to arrange departure date, time, etc... can't leave until Wednesday night! "School holidays" have booked the train out 'til then. Oh well, if I have to spend two days somewhere then this is as good a place as any. And who's in a hurry anyway?

Back home to rest the weary body then off to dinner and the movies... Laurie, Jim and I shouted ourselves (80c) to see "Waterloo". It was either that or "The Satanic Rites of Dracula"! Apart from being an excellent film, it was interesting to see the audience reactions to the American acting, humour and approach to history. For a people more used to Chinese 'action' movies, the battle scenes really spoke their language. It was strange to see the subtitles in Indonesian... an entertaining way to learn the language... and the film itself was a real lesson about what was to me a little known part of history.

We arrived home to find a letter from Steven under the door cancelling our pre-arranged trip up the volcano tomorrow - too bad, but I'm feeling a bit too buggered anyway.

## **Day 46: Tue 29/4/75**

This bloody 'flu just keeps hanging on! Nonetheless, another terrific day... Morning spent chatting with assorted people in the welcoming coolth of the bamboo garden outside our room. Very pleasant and "educational" meeting all those different personalities and being exposed to all those different world views. The afternoon saw us once again on the tennis courts, this time playing against each other, having borrowed racquets and balls from our very friendly neighbours. After embarrassing ourselves for half an hour, the net was removed and the court instantly converted into a soccer stadium. School having ended at 1 o'clock, several kids demonstrated their considerable prowess at this sport... with a plastic ball, bare feet, on an asphalt court!

After lunch, we hired a betcak for 400Rp (\$1) for the afternoon, gently winding our way back to Kota Gede, stopping at most of the interesting looking shops along the way. The driver, Shanarde, was a real character... singing, laughing, chatting our way along the busy Jogja streets, enjoying every minute of the brilliant sunshine, the beaming faces and constant "Hello mister!" greetings from the beautiful children. The great distance, the unpaved, potholed roads and the incessant heat of the sun would have brought a scowl to many a man, but not Shanarde. He never once complained. He was too busy joking with anyone fortunate enough to come within earshot. He allowed us to take turns pedalling the deceptively heavy betcak. He stopped wherever and whenever we wished... and took us to "special places known only to him"! He also translated, guided and advised us as we blundered our way through many shops. We actually bought some silver but the real prize was in the beauty and warmth of the people we met.

When our trip was over and we had paid him a hefty tip, he insisted on taking us further to show us some rare pieces of batik. As promised, these were quite exquisite, but way beyond our meagre finances. We eventually bid farewell to our jovial friend and feasted contentedly under the starlit, still, tropical night before heading once more to the late night movies... this time to see "The Andromeda Strain". This was quite an experience - The 'locals' were vociferously impressed with the incredible colours, gadgets and futuristic scenes in the film, even though they would have had great difficulty following the dialogue. The subtitle projectionist must have been drunk - his lack of timing and his erratic placement of the words on the screen were, well, creative. Of course this display didn't phase the patient audience. This patience appears to be characteristic of the Indonesian people. I suppose it has its origin in the long-suffering way of life dictated by their closeness to the realities of Nature. She respects the expectations of no man! Home to bed at 1.30, pleased with a day where the troubles of the world seem so far removed from my life!

### **Day 47: Wed 30/4/75**

Leaving day at last! As advised, got to the railway station one hour before the ticket office opened. About 30 people had beaten me to it, so I dutifully stood in line, suffering in the stifling heat, humidity and filth of the platform. Everything seemed very orderly and organised - until the office opened its doors, when quiet chaos took over. People suddenly came from everywhere, pushing and shoving their way to the window while those of us who had stood for so long in our patient queue were totally ignored. Enter the police. Ah, thinks I, this should restore some order to this schemozzle. Nope, he just wants a ticket too. So, tommy gun slung over his shoulder he joins the shoving, sweating but silent throng. Giving politeness up as a bad loss, I dive in to the melee to arrive at the window half an hour later, only to be told that 1st and 2nd Class seats are full. As a measure of my desperation I even considered travelling for 20 hours in third class though this thought only lasted a pico-second. Try again tomorrow was the not-so-helpful advice. Thanks, but no thanks. What to do? Eventually make my way to the bus depot where I can buy an expensive (\$6) ticket on the Sari Express to Jakarta. Given no alternative way out of Jogja I reluctantly part with my \$6 and retreat once more to Helen's for a last Jogja lunch. The waitress (Reny) is actually in tears at my pending departure. The way these Javanese wear their emotions so visibly on their sleeves never ceases to intrigue me... I love it! After more tears and many hugs all round I drag myself away to the bus station. Again I am reminded of the transient nature of friendships made while travelling... it's almost as if you trade off quality for quantity!

All packed and aboard by early afternoon for the long trip ahead over uncertain roads through unknown country. What fantastic scenery as we detour via Solo, Semarang, Cebun, Bandung. These places are either in or near the mountains. To see the sun set behind Merapi and its sister volcanos in the stillness of the evening, then to see the whole scene repeated as Venus at her brilliant best followed suit was truly a sight to behold! On through the long twilight and into the blackness of the night we rattled, catching the odd wink of sleep whenever I could. I met a student of tourism and his excellent English provided me with a pleasant and informative travelling companion. He helped me a lot with my faltering Indonesian, too!

A couple of stops (some planned, some not!) and morning found us still 4 hours from Jakarta. The roads have been disgusting, to say the least. I was so glad to finally step off that damn bus and onto the streets of Jakarta after 19 hours of sometimes sleeping, always jolting, never restful travelling. In all of those 19 hours, there was not one minute where the disruptive influence of Man on the landscape was not in evidence. This island sure is crowded. The rivers, houses, cars, roads and people all compete with one another to see which is the filthiest, most despoiled. Cleanliness doesn't seem to be a quality

valued by these people. The number of beggars seems to increase as Jakarta is approached, as does the degree and extent of poverty. Here the term "naked poverty" is literally true... some poor souls owning little more than a tattered rag around their waist. Traveling late at night through this elongated village with many names you see (briefly though vividly) the masses of people wandering the streets competing with the equally bedraggled dogs for scraps of food which may have made it to the gutters. Amid all this squalor you still find some people too proud to beg. Often it is the dogs that win!

## **Day 48: Thu 1/5/75**

First impressions again prove not to be completely misleading, but at least not to be the whole truth. Sure, Jakarta is dirty but it possesses many other (cleaner) facets as well. More on this later. But first, after unfolding myself from my seat-come-bed for the last 19 hours, I realise that I am totally alone in an alien city thousands of miles from home, not sure of where I'm going or even where I am yet, surprisingly, I feel completely confident in myself. Now there's a statement I could not have made 7 weeks ago if placed in the same situation! My obvious increase in self-confidence is something I can attribute to its necessary possession while traveling. Anyway, I eventually found the hostel where Laurie was staying and booked into his room... well, dormitory, shared by eight people. It's pretty grotty but acceptable. It's also very expensive compared with Jogja or Bali at around twice the cost.

"Formalities" completed it is time to start my "business", so after a welcome breakfast and wash we head off for the main street. Laurie leaves to see the girls we met at Samas (remember?) and I head once more for the airline offices. After much haggling and the official run-around I end up with a student discount flight to Singapore but I have to wait for Singapore to alter my other ticket. I discover that I'll need quite a bit more money. Maybe I'll phone home from Singapore. At least all this walking around has provided me with a gutter's eye view of this enormous, sprawling city of 6 million. So far the differences between here and Sydney are minimal... the traffic is chaotic, however. It seems that anything that walks, crawls, is pushed, pulled, dragged, motorised or carried is to be found on these roads... from enormous old busses (5c wherever you want to go) to minicabs (motorised betcaks). These latter contraptions seem to come in two main varieties, depending on whether the motorbike part is in front of or behind the passenger compartment. They all travel at breakneck speed, gleefully disobeying any rules that there may be - although it's not too obvious that there are any rules. In fact such rules as "giving way to pedestrians on crossings" seem not to be merely ignored, they seem to be honoured in the inverse as these Kamikaze drivers take perverse delight in actually aiming for you as you make your precarious way across the road, some of which are 12 lanes wide!

The city seems to be very specialised... having several distinct sections like Chinatown, with its gaudy lights and restaurants galore; the 'seedy' section with massage parlours, well advertised brothels and porn shops; the "people's" section with its amusement parks, fountains, quiet walkways, outdoor shows, music, lawns, statues and theatres; the 'rich' section where you find the huge international hotels, casinos and expensive brothels. Of course, less than half a block away from this opulence is the filth and squalor of the largest section of Jakarta...where the poor people eke out their miserable existences. This section is an embarrassment to a city which likes to

think of itself as emerging into the modern world, so futile attempts are made to keep the poor if not out of mind, then at least out of sight. Here poverty is a word synonymous with life. Here people covered with smallpox scars, riddled with ringworm, blinded by glaucoma or just plain undernourished, struggle every day just to remain alive amongst the rats, dogs, lice and stench of the open sewers. there is no night and day for them, only the never ending search for food. There is little of beauty in their lives, all around is ugliness.

You wonder at the kinds of lives suffered by the old people... was it always as bad as this or was that wizened-up old lady once beautiful, full of hope and dreams? How often could she admit to being truly happy? Look at her now. Crouching over a crawling pile of garbage, searching anxiously for some meagre scrap maybe overlooked by the rats and cockroaches, her filthy skin more exposed through her holy (unholy) rags than not. It seems like she has no more tears to cry, her eyes empty and sad, a reflection of this miserable life. For Christ's sake what can be done? If she were the only one then OK, but the cesspools of this wide oft-forgot world of unbelievable poverty reflect her scrawny face a billion times over. So much so that she becomes faceless in her plight, resigned to her existence... too proud to beg, not even turning towards us as we walk by in the night. Who is she?

This is the part of Jakarta that I should forget but can't. "I'm alright, Jack" is an easy philosophy to have with money in your pocket. It seems downright inhuman, however, not to step out of your comfortable shoes into the dirt of this world and at least recognise the plight of those who certainly are NOT "alright". The question, now, is so clear to me. The answer, though, is even further away than ever!

Jakarta has, of course, many other facets, some illuminated in the tropical night, others hidden in the darkness. We met the two Chrisses again and after an expensive meal (there is no other type here!) we walked for miles through the maze of streets, at times blinded by the lights, at others swallowed by the night. We passed the guarded grandeur of the President's palace and the unabashed squalor of a beggar's hovel. We were intrigued by the congruence of Western clothes, cars and music with Eastern faces, food and language. What a city! At once appealing and detestable, beautiful and ugly. A city of unbelievable wealth and unimaginable poverty. Definitely a place where the word "contrast" takes on a new meaning!

## **Day 49: Fri 2/5/75**

(Seven weeks)

We heard of this place called "Taman Impian jaya Ancol" which sounded very interesting and deserved a visit. So after a morning of reading, writing, waiting for others while they stuffed around, Laurie and I headed seawards not knowing what to expect. The entertainment complex we discovered is actually very new - built not so much for the tourists as for the very rich local and overseas businessmen. The prices were unbelievable... \$1000 a night! There is a large artificial lake surrounded by resort huts, two international hotels, a bowling alley, two nightclubs, a drive-in theatre, an 18 hole golf course, a mini golf course, an enormous swimming pool complex, an oceanarium, a casino, sailing, skiing and diving facilities, imported white sand beaches and a massive Hai Lai stadium.

We arrived about midday, bluffing our way inside the complex by acting like eccentric millionaires who LIKE wearing t-shirts and thongs!. After "looking around" for a while, forking out money at every turn, and being turned away from several of the more luxurious areas, we eventually found ourselves in the oceanarium. This was great but we "jumped ship" before the end which caused a significant ruckus with half the place running every which way searching for us. We even thought they'd drag the river for us, but they soon gave up... a little too soon for my liking! Then came the highlight... the fresh and salt water aquaria. Fish and coral presented in unimaginable profusion. This was the most comprehensive and colourful display of tropical sea life that I have ever seen.

We spent three hours in this paradise, with Laurie very patiently and attentively listening to me spout on and on about the multifarious intricacies of behaviour and physiology. I became so frustrated and felt so inadequate not knowing the answers to many (most) questions that we would both ask. I was constantly reminded of da Vinci's words "So much to learn and so little time in which to learn it" (or words to that effect). For remembering large numbers of facts my mind is useless. For conceptualising and synthesising it is OK, but I need access to reference books to fill in the essential details. I would much rather be able to retain these facts in my head, but I cannot. 'tis a pity but 'tis so! Needless to say I was tremendously impressed with these aquaria. I could literally spend years studying but ONE of these tanks. It really is a shame that life is so short. We hung around to see the piranhas being fed but this unfortunately didn't eventuate.

We stopped off at the ritzy casino. There was not a foreign tourist in sight. Most players were rich local businessmen intent on throwing money away like it was water. They thought nothing of betting \$500 on the turn of a card.

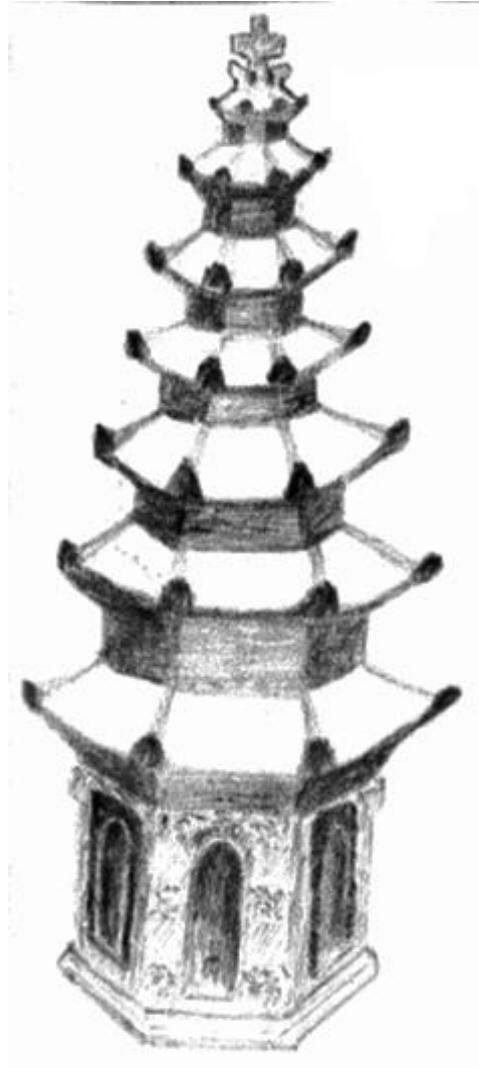
This was truly at the other end of the spectrum to the poverty that lay virtually outside the door. These people certainly were rich - obscenely so... chauffeured Mercedes, expensive jewellery, oh-so-formal attire, the compulsory sneer of contempt for doormen, waiters, etc... it was all there, prompting me to allow my mind to wander down the "is this right" track once more. The gap between these people and the street beggar is an insurmountable chasm. Even if it is somehow bridged (perhaps by force), it seems unlikely that it will stay bridged for long. Laurie bought some chips (min \$4) to try his luck at the blackjack table but couldn't get a seat, so we at least left with our money. Since the food in the complex is so expensive neither of us had eaten all day, so with rumbling stomachs we made our way to the huge stadium to see a game of Hai Lai. What a game! Javanese will bet on anything and the money was flowing freely here too. It reminded me of Randwick racecourse... there would be a 5 minute game, then 10 minutes to place your bets before the next game. The game itself is fascinating. Two teams of two compete in a "knock out" affair - each with huge scoops made of cane, affording tremendous leverage to propel the plastic ball at blinding speed at a brick wall. It was fast, skilful and exciting.

The route home took us past families bedding down in the rain beside the open sewers, their only shelter being discarded cardboard boxes which once contained TV sets. My mind is set in a whirl at the blatant incongruities of this unbelievable city.

### **Day 50: Sat 5/5/75**

For the first time in the trip my intestinal tract has decided to rebel against the unkind barrage of foreign foods to which I've been subjecting it. Boy, have I got the runs! Rather than let the cramps get the better of me I decided to proceed as normal, though never straying too far from a toilet, however! Morning sees Laurie and me in the Presidential Hotel having our curls trimmed in anticipation of Singapore immigration regulations... not too much off but enough to see the ears and collar. We're told that that's the rule. It seems so ridiculous to me that the length of one's hair could even be considered as a criterion for "desirability".

Having bowed to conformity and with lightened heads we proceed to the museum. Here we encounter a fantastic ethnographic display of arts and crafts from all over Indonesia. I am astounded by the antiquity of the culture which was flourishing many centuries before Christ was born. Similarly the ancient origins of Hinduism and the fervour of belief amazed me... truly, religion and culture are (or were, at least) synonymous in this land. Also displayed were "ancient" tools which look remarkably like those still in use, and, of course, weaponry from earliest times to the present. I wonder (rhetorically, of course) if ever there were a time when Man did NOT make and use weapons. The answer is as obvious as his animal origins. And speaking of which, replicas of Solo Man were displayed here, only a couple of hundred miles from their discovery site. Also fascinating are the models of houses and temples and boats, grouped by their location, allowing you to see the evolution of these structures over time reflected in differences between location... just as we can with the evolution of Man. The full spectrum (almost) of vessels from the "primitive" log and raft to the most sophisticated planked prahu can still be seen plying the Indonesian waterways today.



Another intriguing aspect for me was the apparent lack of originality in their art... a statue of Visnu from the 7th Century is EXACTLY the same as those I saw being carved outside Jogja a few days ago. Similarly with the wood carving and batik, however some more radical batik painters have recently begun to deviate a little - for better or worse, who am I to judge?

At this stage my intestines were winning the battle with my mind, necessitating a quick return home, a relieving visit to the "mandi" (toilet) followed by a collapse from exhaustion onto the bed where I slept for several hours. Much needed! Awoke feeling OK enough for a meal of steak and veg (live dangerously, I always say). A meal like this, however, merely reinforces how expensive Jakarta is. In the restaurant I met a girl from Western Australia who is teaching English here. I learnt a lot from her about working in Asia... it would be so easy to teach anywhere in Indonesia. The only qualifications you need, apparently, is the ability to speak English. You don't even need to speak Indonesian. She was a fascinating girl of 18 who threw in everything on an impulse to travel alone... and she loves it! I think, however,

that her motives were deeper than she let on! Unless I HAD TO, I don't think I could handle such a lifestyle... especially choosing to work in Jakarta.

Laurie's "date" didn't show up but while we were waiting we took the opportunity to have a terrific, deep and revealing discussion... He really has a great deal of depth and circumspection in him. He is, however, a real loner, vainly searching for some sort of "meaning" (aren't we all?). I do hope he finds what he's looking for. We waited 'til 9.00 without luck, so took a 5c bus ride, not knowing where it was going. We saw a helluva lot of this sprawling city - the freeways, the parks and gardens, the towers, fountains, hotels, amusement centres, convention halls, sculptures, sporting facilities, etc. Most of these things leave Sydney for dead in their modernity and efficiency. We got off wherever we liked and just walked around absorbing the night. Somehow we found our way home about midnight to crash after yet another great day...

## Singapore

### **Day 51: Sun 4/5/75**

We had planned a trip to "Miniature Indonesia" before leaving for the airport, but learnt from the two Chrisses, who had gone there yesterday, that it would take too long and, anyway, was merely a larger version of the building display section of the Museum. It was also unfinished. Most of the day, then, was spent saying farewells (you meet a lot of people, traveling!) and sorting out the inevitable payment hassles with the hostel. A sad but friendly farewell with Chris and Chris yielded the conclusion that our parting was really due to a clash of motives. We swapped itineraries and addresses, but I really don't think we'll meet again. At least not in Asia. Oh well, such are the joys and sorrows of Flexibility!

At 3.00 we start hassling for taxis. Too expensive, so we catch a bus. It goes the wrong way, so we alight and end up paying an exorbitant price for a heli-cak (motorised betcak). Suffering under the weight of three guys and their packs, it could hardly move. It very soon expired from the strain, only to get moving enough to be stopped by the cops who promptly gave it a defect notice and confiscated the driver's license. Undeterred, we continued on our way as soon as the police were out of sight. No sooner was the engine coaxed into life than we stopped again... out of petrol! It was now 4.30, by which time we should have been at the airport. The adrenalin was now starting to flow.

Mobile once more, surrounded by the smell of a burning clutch, our intrepid driver presses on regardless as his machine literally shakes itself to bits around us. At the mere thought of yet another hill, the driver's door falls off. Desperate now, we urge him to leave the door and keep going. He does. Five o'clock we arrive at the airport amid smoke, the smell of burning clutch, a glowing engine and a final death-throw explosion. Clutching our packs, we run headlong into the crowds and bustle of the terminal. Where on Earth do we go? Tickets checked - OK. Baggage checked - OK. Airport tax paid - OK. Money changed - OK. Immigration checked - just OK. Out of breath we run towards the boarding gate as the loudspeaker's emotionless voice announces an hour's delay for our flight. Whew, what a relief! Boy this jet-setting is rough on the nerves! Eventually we are aboard and airborne, leaving the expansive lights of Jakarta behind. I'm not sorry to leave this city. I have little to say against it, but also little to say for it. It is a dirty Asian city, that's it! What "atmosphere" it had seemed forced, superficial and unreal... like a hasty dressing on a deep wound. This feeble man-made illumination rapidly dissolved as we ascended through cloud to be greeted by a most magnificent blood-red horizon. It was as if the sun was conjuring up its radiant best as a suitably beautiful farewell to Indonesia. Since the plane was chasing the sun, this breathtaking sunset just lingered in the Western sky.

One and a half hours and two deliciously large servings of real food later, we glimpsed our first spectacular views of Singapore. And spectacular it most certainly was! So many colourful, flickering lights, towered over by enormous apartment buildings stacked like dominoes radiating colour for miles around. The long, wide illuminated streets channeling the restless red and white lights of the matchbox sized cars, trucks and busses. And then there was the harbour... reflecting this illuminated fairyland as a shimmering mirror, seemingly beckoning us to become part of the image... We're coming! I once again feel so inadequate in searching for words suitable to describe such a scene and such feelings as these. Perhaps they haven't yet been invented!

Touchdown (ouch!), then the inevitable Immigration hassles. They seemed to take an instant dislike to me - perhaps it had something to do with my uncanny likeness to the giant poster of a "hippy" prominently displayed as an example of an "undesirable person"? They seemed similarly unimpressed by my lack of money or onward ticket and by my water-soaked, plastered-down hair. They gave me only a seven day visa. Laurie, Brigitte and I catch a bus to the hotel Pin Guan in one of the poorer sections of this rich city. (Brigitte is a Swiss girl heading the same way as us who unfortunately also resembled the "hippy" caricature on the airport poster, so was also restricted to a seven day stay). My first impressions of Singapore see it as a huge, well-designed, busy, immaculately clean and efficient Chinatown. I am definitely impressed. Cleanliness is like a religion here. Our hotel is no exception... Chinese, relatively cheap and accessible to most parts of the city. The owner is a real character. He speaks a strange form of English "a hundred to the dozen". He never waits for you to answer. He's like a five foot six ulcer with legs! A real nerve case if ever there was one. We're tired of Immigration hassles; tired of lugging our packs all over town; and we want to prepare well for our first daylight impressions of this "centre of the world". So sleep comes quickly to our newly formed trio...

## **Day 52: Mon 5/5/75**

What a day!! (again). We began with a bus trip through this immaculate city to the Post Office... after seven weeks and only four letters I get SIX all at once - handed to me by the most efficient clerk in the most efficient Post Office I've ever seen. Two from Glenny, two from Mum and Dad, one from Swiss (great!) and one from Pease (inquiring about my 'social life'). I was overwhelmed and had to read them then and there. Christ how I miss the familiar things of life... I guess that old saying really rings true - "you don't know what you've got 'til it's gone"! Anyway, on with some necessary business (airlines, banks, etc) then we walk (what else?) through the many backstreets of Chinatown. Now this is what I call Chinatown... literally EVERYTHING you see is Chinese. The stalls, the temples, the shanties, the buildings, the lanes, the food... Ahh, the food - exquisite. Here I have more confidence in what I eat than in Sydney, let alone Indonesia! Here cleanliness is really a fetish. Most of the time the menus are in Chinese so we make do by pointing and sampling. I find myself eating stuff that I would never even have considered in Sydney - squid, octopus, frogs legs, prawns, vegetables of unknown variety, etc. I drew the line at still-living sea molluscs, though, and freshly killed monkey brains.

Our walk took us past the Thian Hock Keng Temple, the oldest Chinese and most important Hokkein Buddhist temple in Singapore. Unbelievable. The customs (like fortune casting, scattering sticks from a vase; ancestor, effigy worship; incense offerings; coin offerings, etc), the building (ornate, open air courtyards with enormous, brightly painted contoured roofs) and the statuary (large and small ancestor and/or god symbols) led me once again to curse my ignorance of the meaning of such things. I attempt to enquire but the explanations either a) don't exist, or b) are shrugged off as 'it's the custom', or c) differ drastically between each branch of Buddhism, or d) are so obscure as to be accessible to only the devout few that happen to belong to that particular sect! I am forced in many cases to 'absorb now, dissect later'... perhaps.

Onwards past hectic preparations for a Chinese Opera on the sidewalk... we'll HAVE to see one later. On to the People's Park Shopping complex. As with the rest of Singapore (yes, I've seen the Merlion) it was clean, efficient, cheap with exceptionally courteous, environmentally aware and happily healthy people. Signs are everywhere promulgating the new faith - "Good food means good health", "Wash before handling food", etc. Everywhere there were signs indicating the joys to be had from clean food, clean streets, clean bodies, clean words, clean dishes, family planning, tree conservation, animal care and health care. And what's more, they seem to practice what they preach! Little pollution of any sort (including NOISE!) is in evidence.

On to the waxworks... educating if nothing else! Then Brigitte snuffled back home with the 'flu while I went to phone home and Laurie rested his weary bones. That phone call... WOW!. How great it was to hear Glenny's voice. I was shaking so much. It was a pity that so much of those precious 3 minutes were wasted on 'business' matters but I need that money! More walking through narrow backstreets and alongside 6-lane thoroughfares (many of which are one-way!) brought us eventually to the 24-storey Phoenix Hotel. Bluffing our way past the doorman, we made our way to the rooftop for a spectacular view of the city. The planned layout, especially the parks and gardens, became more obvious from here. I am impressed!

We then walk back through the now-congested streets to the "Thieves Market". (We must have walked close to 20 kilometres today... or so my legs keep informing me!) This place is where you can buy anything... and I do mean ANYTHING! And no questions asked (hence the name). There are mobile hawkers, stationary hawkers, young hawkers, old hawkers, Chinese, Malay and Indian hawkers. There are watches, clothes, tools, bikes, drugs, food, more food, plastic goods, toys, fruit, stationery - you name it, it's there! And the people! But there's still 6 more days for more stable impressions to form and I don't think my weary legs can support me any longer. We discover the famous Bugis Street where "it all happens", but we were by now too stuffed to care so we ate something unidentifiable at a roadside stall (I think my stomach is now so immune to attack that it could rust!), and trudged wearily home. I think I'm falling in love with this city - I can feel it in my bones, if not my feet!

### **Day 53: Tue 6/5/75**

Today I played "tourist" and sightseer, for a change. By public bus to Jurong to visit the Tiger Balm Gardens. The public transport system is, as you would expect, almost faultless... big, comfortable, fast busses running non-stop to anywhere. And they're cheap. A little different to the chaos that accompanies any similar journey in Indonesia! One word could describe the Tiger Balm (it cures everything) gardens... UNREAL. A concrete-and-paint dream come true. Gruesome, hideous, humorous, beautiful, ugly, true, mythical, moralistic, entertaining. And so kitsch, the lot of it. It was as if we had stumbled into some madman's dream. Apparently on weekends the whole world and it's dog visit this perverse place, but today Laurie and I were almost alone (Brigette was still crook).

Fortunately we met a guy who was more than happy to show us around (for free!). He helped us get our minds around some of the more bizarre concepts as he explained some of the stories and meanings behind the grotesque statuary. he was an intelligent Burmese ex-pilot whose own life-story was fascinating in itself. He told us of the 'hidden' aspects of Singapore - of the unceasing oppression of freedom, of the unbending system of laws, of the unbelievably low wages (\$2 Sing/Hr) and of the cruelty and heartbreak which often accompanies the enforcement of these strict codes of ethics and laws. He told us of the dozen or so suicides each week. He told us of the harshness of docking your pay when sick. He told us of teachers being fired on the spot for being late for work. He has spent the last 25 years in Singapore, so he seemed to know what he was talking about. It appears that happiness for many is merely enforced... poverty and discontent may be concealed but they are nonetheless the reality for many. As in Jakarta there is a facade of wealth but here the facade is so organised that it becomes confused with reality. Our friend said that he comes to the Tiger Balm Gardens to find relief from the realities of life in the unrealities of the imagination. I suspect that many other Singaporeans share this motive.

We hitched a ride into the city where we encountered a Chinese "Opera in the Street". No tourist show, this one! The young actors and actresses were dressed in the most colourful, shimmering costumes, with their faces painted in such a way as to conceal the contours - giving them a most unreal expression. The music was, of course, loud and percussive, with cymbals, drums and weird stringed instruments made even more pervasive by a huge, distorted PA system. The stage teetered precariously on stilts. The props were very amateurish, as were the stage directions. But then the play was to go on for 5 hours! The actors spent most of their time under the stage sleeping or playing cards. The plot was, to say the least, confusing, although full of action and overtly melodramatic. The audience was mostly Chinese and had to stand in the Singaporean sun. Some were paying intense attention to the

action. Others were content to carry on conversations, business or to eat as if nothing else was happening. Amid all this hubbub the age-old story of boy/girl/love/marriage/etc was slowly unfolding. All-in-all this was quite an experience, and took my mind back to the different types of dramas I'd witnessed in Indonesia.

Of course we couldn't stand 5 hours of this, so we got a lift to Mt. Haber where we climbed the (steep) mountain and took the skylift across to the "Isle of Peace" on the other side of the harbour. Yet another tourist rip off, but we got quite a spectacular view of the city, harbour, docks, wharves and dry docks. What an enormous port this is. The traffic in the harbour has to be seen to be believed. Hundreds of ships of every shape and size, from everywhere in the world, littering the harbour in what could only be described as organised chaos. The headaches for the port authorities created by such a profusion of vessels must be unbearable. What foresight Raffles must have had in choosing this spot as a trading port in the early 1800's. To see the rain approach Singapore from the sea from such a height was really something. The human ants below us hardly flinch - they know of the speed with which such squalls pass and just work through it.

With the airborne journey over we head once more for the city. We zig-zag through streets familiar and unfamiliar. We have now been to most sections of the city. We have seen, smelt and heard most of the sights, smells and sounds that permeate Singapore. We feel that we could walk the streets blindfolded and still know where we were... each section seems to have its own distinctive odours and noises. There are Indian curries, Chinese spices and Malaysian satays. The mixture of food flavours seem to mimic the unique agglomeration of cultures that is the true essence of Singapore.

Home to check on Brigitte, then out again for a meal. We decide to forego the unidentifiable foreign delicacies and have a decadent Western meal. What bliss! So cheap and so good - and so familiar! These people really do seem to understand how to make food delicious! In another section of the restaurant was a birthday celebration for a Chinese girl. The hilarity and mood was infectious and we soon found ourselves in the midst of these happy people, singing, dancing and enjoying ourselves into the night. It was so good to be with people who were happy to welcome strangers into their private celebrations. We quickly began to feel as if we truly belonged. My rendition of "why was she born so beautiful..." had them in stitches. Laughter crosses so many a linguistic and cultural barrier! Intoxicated with the joy of it all, Laurie and I floated our way home through the still vibrant night-life where instead of sleeping we talked 'til the early hours of the morning. It is SO much better having someone with whom you can genuinely share your experiences!

### **Day 54: Wed 7/5/75**

After the late night we slept in. I filled in the rest of the morning writing no fewer than four letters and six postcards... and I still didn't get around to writing yesterday's diary! Then off into town on stiffening legs to catch the bus to Jurong, this time to witness the much advertised Instant Asia cultural show. We should have known better when we saw "Inc." after the name! What a rip-off. The place was swarming with tourists disgorged from huge air-conditioned busses. We attended more out of interest in how the "other half" travels than from interest in the performances. Not my scene, I'm afraid. Everywhere you go you have to pay. Of course, some of the dances were of interest - if you could ignore the contrived location, the showmanship of the presentation and the bored American tourists. The program included a vibrant Malay umbrella dance, a delicate, graceful Chinese dance of the Fairies, a weird, fast, intermittently active Indian "Dance of Civa" with bells on the dancers' ankles and nothing but percussion accompaniment. Following this was the spectacularly acrobatic Chinese Lion dance (excellent!) and the rip-off snake charmer (have your picture taken with the snake!). Not bad as a comparative survey of the ethnological differences between the dance and drama of Singapore's major cultural groups but the tourist orientation turned me off. Is this what's in store for my beautifully spontaneous Bali? I'm afraid so.

Back to town to pick up my much needed money and to see about buying a cheap black market airline ticket. They really DO sell anything and everything here! Back at the hotel we manage to talk Brigitte into coming out for tea. We pick up Sam and eat at the local "chew and spew" where you can get a terrific, though unrecognisable, meal for S\$1. The meal was too much for Brigitte's delicate stomach so we took her home, leaving the three "boys" free for a "night on the town". Walking everywhere (what else?) we pass a real "waterfront bar" and decide to check it out. Inside is just like stepping into a movie scene... smoke, booze, dim lights, girls everywhere, loud music, drunken Americans pawing at the bar girls... As soon as we are seated we HAVE to order drinks (\$2.50 for orange juice!) and we are literally pounced upon by girls. After two minutes of talk, punctuated by much leg rubbing (mine, not hers), she asks with apparent innocence "Could you buy me a drink?". "Of course!" (First mistake). "Here, (\$10) go and get yourself one." (Second mistake). Five minutes and \$7 later I have learnt an important lesson. And an expensive one. The "sweet wine" she bought was, of course, Coca Cola. And, of course, my protestations and appeals on the grounds of impending poverty fell on deaf ears!

Poorer though wiser, we leave and head for Bugis Street where we soaked up the atmosphere until 3am. What a place this is. The local pick-up point for lesbians, transvestites, homosexuals and prostitutes, and, naturally, the hang-

out for sailors, merchant seamen, tourists - everybody! We all watch each other, talk to everyone, watch the drunken sailors being dragged away by the MP's, watch the transvestites parade like peacocks between the tables of the rich Americans able to afford their peculiar form of diversion at \$300 per night. My mind is overflowing with the barrage of experiences from this wondrous place... the noise, the shouting, the drunkenness, the brawling, the colour, the lights, the milling throngs of people, the confusing smells of food, the pickpockets, the sellers of "dirty postcards" and dirty little plastic toys, the loudmouthed tourists, the inflated prices - EVERYTHING. By 3am it all becomes too much for my feeble little brain so we struggle off home. Laurie and I, however, are so high that we continue talking until dawn. This was merely an extension of a discussion begun that afternoon which had since then involved several participants. As we talk I can feel my thoughts coalescing into some form of clear meaning. This vibrant, alive city seems to encourage this kind of searching conversation... and boy, do I love it. If only we didn't have to waste time sleeping!

### **Day 55: Thu 8/5/75**

Needless to say after last night's effort it was a "sleep-in and take it easy" sort of morning. Laurie suddenly discovered that he didn't have a visa for Thailand so off to the Embassy he went while Brigette and I went to the bank and PO (more business!). All this done, we had a quiet, slow (she was still recovering) walk around the river section of Singapore, thrilling to the hustle and bustle, the noises, the throngs of busy people, the cranes, the junks, the bags of undefined cargo moving on and off boats with chaotic precision... and permeating it all, the frightful stench that is the river. It was virtually impossible to actually SEE the water with the boats being so tightly packed, but your nose continually reminded you that it was there!



Brigette wanted to buy a Ma Jon game, so much of the afternoon was spent poking around in the abundantly overstocked Chinese curio shops. These places are amazing... they literally sell everything. And most of it is on display. It all looks so enticingly beautiful. Included in our amblings was a detour to the "House of Jade" and an ongoing art display. The former is full to the brim with jade of all kinds and ages... some from the Ch'ing Dynasty! It is a most beautiful stone for sculpting but, again, is "not my scene".

The art display included both modern and traditional works... oil, watercolours and batik as well as sculpture (mostly modern iron stuff). I'm afraid that much of the art impressed me as being little more than a wild ego trip for the artist - a fact that seems increasingly evident in most "creative" productions (films, books, music, etc). Brigette trundled off home, leaving me to have a meal and 'crash' for a couple of hours in the peace of the Merlion's

Garden. Back home I found a disconsolate Laurie - he'll have to wait until Monday. When in doubt, eat. That's our motto. So out we go to dinner and to a movie (9.30). We joined a bewildered throng of Chinese lining up for their tickets and soon discovered the cause of their bewilderment... it was a Chinese film (we knew that), without English subtitles (we didn't know that!). Nonetheless, we found it easy to follow most of the action packed, violent, though bloodless, kung-fu plot. It seemed as though one guy was taking on half of China in his attempt to save the world (or something) - and he didn't even wrinkle his clothes! The Chinese audience loved the non-stop action and the inevitable, honourable victory of the hero. The audience's reaction often proved more entertaining for us than the movie. Ah well, another late night, but who's complaining?

## **Day 56: Fri 9/5/75**

(2 months!)

Deigned by the authorities to be our last day in this wondrous city, so after sleeping in, writing letters and diary, we head into town to make the most of it. Laurie, however, is soon ensnared by the red-tape monster at Imigrasi, so Brigitte and I retreat to the myriad of roadside stalls to seek solace in the food. We both agree that the Indian food is just too hot but the Chinese food is superb... so unlike the "Chinese" food we have back home. This is the real thing - complete with cockroaches, rats, rain, etc. In between obscene bouts of engorgement we bargained our way through the rip-off merchants in Change Alley, ummed and ahed our way through the Chinese curio shops, reveled in the delights of a Chinese bakery, ambled our way through Chinatown once more, detoured through another open air Chinese opera and perused our way through the countless shops that are accurately described as the World's clearing houses. We then paid the exorbitant sum of 10c to see the most beautiful, creative and educational display of marine and river aquatic life imaginable. It easily surpassed the magnificence of Jakarta's aquarium! Then and there, I made up my mind to delve further into the wonders of Marine Biology. If ever a man loved a subject, then it is I that love the study of the ocean and the life within it. It has always and forever will hold an inexplicable fascination for me. I never cease to wonder at the colours, the behaviour patterns, the diversity and the evolutionary forces that have shaped it all. But mostly I just stand in awe at its unimaginable beauty. We gazed in bewilderment at a sea cucumber whose form and coloration defy adequate description. If they employed it on a science fiction movie set no one would believe that it was real.

Behind the aquarium was a hill. Perhaps merely because it was there, we climbed it. Lying breathless, peaceful and quiet at the summit, surrounded by dense tropical rain forest, accompanied by countless varieties of exotic birds, warmed by the gentle rays of the now-setting tropical sun and totally at peace with the world, I take the opportunity to reflect on this city at the centre of the world. My conclusion? One huge melting pot of cultures, races, religions, languages, values, politics, food and, of course, people. Truly a fascinating place. In a way I'm pleased that my visa is expiring because the life of a tourist in Singapore is necessarily one of a superficial sightseer. The people appear to be more reticent than, say, the Balinese in revealing themselves. They are not as "friendly" or open as those in Jogja. Sure, they're courteous, considerate, and helpful, but they are so "Westernised" that we are just commoners to them. It doesn't excite them as much to have us show an interest in their way of life. You come to Singapore to SEE Singapore. You cannot get to KNOW Singapore. Occasionally I was able to glimpse behind the Western facade to see the real thing, but it was only brief. A city is

primarily a city wherever you go. Of course there are striking differences but the net result of putting too many people in too little space is always the same... detachment, involvement in self, disinterest in outsiders.

I awake from my mind's wanderings (wonderings?) to find it already dark and Brigitte sound asleep beside me in the grass. We eat again and amble home to find a successful Laurie. Naturally we celebrate Laurie's victory over the bureaucracy by talking once more late into the night. Laurie and I get on so well that I hope our friendship will last even when we get home. It will be interesting to see what may happen to our friendship in that other, very different environment. Singapore, both I and my foot specialist love you!

PS We tried to bludge a lift on a sampan around the harbour but, of course, it's been done before and the owners wanted unbelievable prices. So we consoled ourselves with the incredible view from the shore. Although the port is open to the sea, you cannot see the horizon in any direction. Why? Everything is obliterated by the enormous profusion of ships... everything!

## Malaysia

### **Day 57: Sat 10/5/75**

Departure day. We catch a local bus through the sprawling suburbs, past the huge reservoirs, through the enormous industrial and housing estates, past the well ordered parks and landscaped factories, across the border to Johore Baharu in Malaysia. All this for 20c! At the border we encounter the openly hostile Imigrasi seated smugly beneath their "Welcome to Malaysia" sign. My outgoing ticket and my newly acquired wealth enable me to hold out for a 14 day visa but Brigitte, being only slightly more impoverished, has to leave in a week. Of course we object but these officials are trained to look right through you, so it was all to no avail. The system is so corrupt and these people so crazed with power that we would have had better luck freezing a snowball in Hell! Anyway, we have now left the island-city. I miss the adventurous life I had in Bali. The people there were so revealing and every day presented me with something new. That time with Brian I remember so well. But now? Things like that just don't seem to happen any more. Things are not so new. Much more of what I experience seems all too familiar. The people I meet seem less willing to involve you in their lives. It's all far too... civilised!

I now often wonder about people who so proudly say they've "seen" such-and-such a place. Big deal! For me there is little to say for "sightseeing". Being involved in life, in different lives, gaining new perspectives, meeting all kinds of people, hearing their different points of view... these are the things I want to get from traveling. In Bali this sort of experience happened quite spontaneously. Being more mobile was a tremendous advantage. But now it happens only infrequently - even when you go out of your way to make it happen, as I have attempted to do. Perhaps: 1) I expect too much, or 2) it is actually happening but by now I'm so used to it that it is no longer 'new' to me, or 3) I was just so lucky in Bali!

Anyway, where was I? Oh yes, Johore. From here my crazy Swiss companion and I bus our way out of this dirty, noisy, poor city (yes, we're back in Asia!), then try our luck with the famed Malaysian hitch-hiking. Well, it sure lived up to its reputation... within 5 minutes we got a lift with a jovial, well-educated, middle-aged Chinese businessman. He spent quite some time rearranging his Datsun to accommodate us and our packs - and was so apologetic for the delay! He drives us to Hitam through mile after mile of rubber and palm oil plantations. My initial excitement at this sight soon fades as I rapidly learn that the entire country consists of rubber and palm oil plantations. Malaysian houses are very different to any I've yet seen. Usually on stilts, with huge windows, airy courtyards and huge, see-through carved wall panels. Even the poorest houses appear to be well-built. Malaysia has the highest standard of living in all Asia (or so the book says), but still there is

filth and poverty. The mixed races of people, however, appear to be friendly - at least so far.

From Hitam we hitch a ride in a Kombi with a Chinese family who are so proper, polite and civil that we feel ashamed of our shabby, unwashed appearance. At Muan we get a ride to Malaka in an ancient, rattling, half-dead truck with a toothless, manic Malay driver who insisted on chatting incessantly to us in his native tongue, even though it was patently obvious that we hadn't a clue what he was saying! Added to this, he continually preferred to look at US instead of the road, leading to several near-death experiences. We actually ran another car off the road at one stage, but our intrepid driver ploughed on with nary a blink of concern.

Thankful to be alive, we arrived in Malaka just on nightfall. After booking into a cheap hotel, we ventured out into the streets of this historic city. It is a typical Malaysian city with its heterogeneity of cultures, religions and people, but it has the added spice of a very mixed past... The Portuguese, Dutch, English, Chinese and Malay have all had their turn at stuffing up the countryside. Remnants of these occupations are everywhere. Christianity, Hindu, Islam and Buddhism have all left their mark, and their practitioners. We visit the oldest Chinese Buddhist temple in Malaysia. Simply stunning! We also see the oldest Mosque. Not nearly as beautiful or ornate, but nonetheless interesting. Islam seems to be a real down-to-earth religion. No mucking about with meaningless icons, etc. The city gives me the impression of still being unspoilt by tourism with the consequence that the people are quite friendly, reminding me of Indonesia. There are no "European" meals to be had here and even the Indian food is delicious, maybe because it's the real thing (?). Ten o'clock and our weary twosome is already asleep, satisfied with yet another fulsome day.

## **Day 58: Sun 11/5/75**

The day of rest. And that's just what we did. The Christian half of the town closed down completely, making this quiet town even quieter. We slept in, as usual, but only now am I beginning not to feel guilty at doing so. I find it very difficult to learn how to relax when I'm just not used to it! Eventually we roused ourselves enough to succumb to the pleasures of oriental food. Back home eating was often a real drag. Here, it becomes a real adventure (usually into the unknown!). While eating our favourite breakfast - banana roti with sugar - at the little roadside across the street, precariously straddling the spittoons that hadn't been emptied since the Portugese occupation, we spied an enormous rat scurrying past. The hapless rodent also caught the eye of the cook, who in one rapid, fluid motion despatched the rat with a single deft blow of his formidable spatula... and who nonchalantly returned to flipping the roti with the very same implement! Needless to say, we chose to eat elsewhere after that!

The remainder of the day was spent drinking (it's very hot), writing (we are both avid diarists), talking (it's fascinating seeing Brigitte's "European" perspective on things), eating (what else?), sketching (Brigette is a draughtsperson by trade), sightseeing (temples, museums, more temples, mosques, graveyards, harbour, old Portuguese and Dutch forts, churches, cathedrals, more temples... this town sure has a chequered history!), and just lazing on the park lawn in the shade of the enormous flame trees just soaking up the atmosphere. And observing the passing parade... this town appears to have at least one representative of every race known to Man... or Woman. And speaking of women, here must be where they hide the most beautiful girls in Asia. And as if their beauty wasn't daunting enough, they could certainly not be described as shy. Instead of turning away from an obvious "perve", most just return your gaze and smile temptingly at you!

The Chinese wives appear to be very dominating. Chinese husbands are hard-working and submissive. Everyone seems to be very clothes conscious - the long dresses, the leather shoes, the slick hairdos never out of place, the jewellery tastefully but obviously displayed, the "posing" on the beach, in the park, on the main street... all to show off how "Westernised" each person has become! There is poverty here but it is not as stark or obvious (or as numerous) as it was in Indonesia. Moving northwards you see a greater Chinese influence. They certainly are the "brains" and the businessmen of Asia, closely followed by the industrious Indians, though.

I go out alone to eat dinner (Brigette is on a diet!) and end up being shouted by the owner of the restaurant, no less. He is obviously so pleased to have me choose HIS restaurant in which to eat (2 rotis, 1 mee goreng, 1 coffee) and that I could speak a little Malay that he let me go without paying. He was an

Indian owning a Chinese restaurant selling both Chinese and Indian fare. He introduced his family to me and we all got on extremely well, laughing at my well-rehearsed chopstick comedy and generally communicating quite proficiently in Malay. Actually I surprised myself at my grasp of the language, but I guess it really is a case of necessity being the mother of... you know. Home at last for some reading, writing and relaxing conversation with Brigitte. Then to bed...

## **Day 59: Mon 12/5/75**

The governor of Malaka decided to die today so a holiday was instantaneously declared in this state. Half-mast flags appeared from nowhere as Brig and I walked our early way to the bus station. Brig couldn't get on the bus to Kuala Lumpur so she took a taxi. She is to meet her fiance there. On my twisting way back to town I met a fellow Australian, Trevor, and we instantly "hit it off". He also is a BSc(Hons) with a Major in animal behaviour. Boy, did we have lots to talk about! He has just returned from several weeks in the Malaysian Highlands and described in vivid detail the jungle, the mozzies, the wild tribesmen, the perpetually wet rain forests, the mozzies, the snake infected swamps, the well hidden animal life, the mozzies, the profuse orchids, etc. It was expensive, uncomfortable and (he reflects) probably not worth it. When I again team up with Laurie we might consider spending some time there (???)

Apart from talking about everything under the general headings of philosophy, biology, psychology, sociology, behaviour and religion, we also did the sightseeing bit once more. Experiencing a new town is sort of like reading a great book... you "scan" it for initial impressions and overall effect first, then return to the bits that interest you and savour the details, dissecting and analysing every nuance. I seemed to get much more out of this town, its people, food, history and even the marketplace through seeing them with Trevor than I did with Brigitte. It's quite remarkable how another's presence and perspective colours one's attitudes and view of things. It just goes to show how subjective one's view of the world must be and how one perceives something to be and how this doesn't necessarily match how that thing actually IS.

I learnt so much of the flora and fauna hereabouts... Hill Mynas that talk, House Starlings that build beneath eaves, kingfishers that eat frogs, an incredible plant (*Mimosa pudica*) with a "nervous system" that detects vibration and rapidly closes its leaves and lowers its stems in response. Mudskippers, Durian fruit, fiddler crab displays. We were experiencing it all. With each of us learning from the other. Intellectually, I felt quite at home, stimulated by our observations and by our conversations. Trevor convinced me that I must read some Bertrand Russell.

Meanwhile, back at the holiday... all Government offices closed, many screaming sirens as the local constabulary escort huge black limousines enclosing important, serious-looking dignitaries back and forth through the crowded streets. At lunchtime the whole place came to a standstill and the streets cleared of traffic. A funeral procession with guns, band, soldiers, slow marching, cannon-mounted, flag-draped coffin, etc, then wound its slow, sad

way to the cemetery, allowing us to glimpse the sorrow laden face of the PM, Tun Hazi Abdul Razak bin Dato Hussein, as he marched with the fellow mourners through the midday heat.

I find this a friendly, relaxing, interesting and stimulating town. You can walk down the same street a dozen times and each time find something new to see, do, eat or otherwise experience. We spent some of the night in the "people's park" - a pier-like amusement centre where all the young people hang out. They really seemed to enjoy watching us make fools of ourselves playing billiards, miniature soccer and shooting at tin ducks, etc, and everyone joined in the fun. These people seem so uncomplicated. We were to go to the movies but they were closed due to the Governor's death. Oh well, I enjoy sleeping anyway!

## **Day 60: Tue 13/5/75**

An interesting day in more ways than one. Down to the PO early to leave a note for Laurie. Hung around a while expecting him to show up... no luck. Also missed catching Trevor and ended up spending the morning completely on my own. I'm afraid I don't like being in strange surroundings on my own. Having no one to talk to means you either talk to yourself or not at all... either alternative is not desirable. I bought a harmonica and attempted to entertain myself (and a few bemused locals) in the park. I also read a Time magazine, cover to cover. It was little more than a transparent attempt to justify America's Indochina mistakes. I'm so relieved to see the whole thing is finally over and that Vietnam is, theoretically, unified. It's pleasing, also, to see the victors so intelligent in their victory. More so than the losers in their loss!

Anyway, I eventually bumped into Trevor (it's not a very big town!) and together we witnessed a Chinese funeral. First came the lantern, then the priest, followed by a truck laden with a very noisy percussion (drums and cymbals) band, another band (this time a real brass band!) playing a completely different, mournful tune. The object of the competing bands seemed to be to make as much noise as possible! Then came a truck carrying an immensely ornate, intricately carved wooden coffin housed inside an equally ornate, colourful pagoda. Mounted on the pagoda was an effigy of a bird, symbolising the flight of the soul into heaven. Grasping the trailing edge of the truck (Lin Choo's Coffee) were the relatives of the deceased alongside the professional mourners who were dressed in real hessian sacks. All had heads lowered and were howling in further opposition to the confusion of sounds preceding them. Behind this mournful chaos came the worldly possessions that were to accompany the soul heavenwards... paper effigies of a Mercedes, a two storey house, a TV set, a four-poster bed, real and imitation food, and millions of dollars of "Hell Money" - Monopoly-like notes bought (very cheaply) for the use of the deceased as he enjoys his other worldly possessions in Heaven! Following this cacophony of sight and sound came the hundreds of onlookers (including us), shuffling along at a snail's pace as the procession wound its halting way along Malaka's crowded streets. We followed it past the Museum, past St Paul's (where St Francis Xavier's remains were once kept), past the Sultan's well (where, it is said, if you drink the water you will return to Malaka - and by the look of it, you might never leave!). The whole shebang then stopped while adjustments were made to the pagoda (streamlining?). The band and foot-borne followers soon dissolved and the two trucks (band and body) took off at an alarming rate, pursued by carloads of relatives, etc, to an unknown (to us!) destination.

Checking once more on Laurie's arrival (no sign!) we eat (again) and go to the movies to see Chariots of the Gods... which provided us with more than enough subject matter on which to exercise our jaw muscles late into the

night. We plan to leave tomorrow - can't wait any longer for Laurie. I'll leave messages wherever I go but I can't help feeling that I've seen the last of him, unfortunately. I wonder what happened to him, though?

## **Day 61: Tue 14/5/75**

Off at 9 o'clock. After one and a half hours of hitchhiking we get a lift in an old diesel Mercedes car. We soon wished we hadn't! They must give their driving licenses out in cereal boxes here! We covered the 80 miles to Kuala Lumpur in record time, only driving one bus, three bikes and another car off the road in the process. The roads aren't all that narrow, it's just that the spaced out Malay driver thought that he should make use of every part of the road. He thought nothing of overtaking on double lines around a blind corner while cresting a hill. During those brief moments when my eyes were open I caught glimpses of the countryside. We're inland now and the geography reminds me of that around the Glasshouse Mountains in Queensland - flat plains (covered in oil palm and rubber trees, of course) surrounded by huge, heavily forested mountain ranges etched with ancient, deep gorges, filled with mist. Dotted amongst the greenery are 'typical' Malay houses. All are minor variants of the one aesthetic style, albeit with some sporting galvanised iron roofs.

Kuala Lumpur (yes, we made it!) looks like a compact version of Jakarta. Noisy, busy, dirty and chaotic in design, concept and, of course, traffic. Seasoned traveler that I now am (huh!), very little of the sights, sounds and smells seem new to me. There appears to be a certain sameness about Asian cities - or perhaps they are all so different to what I'm used to that I see only those aspects that make them unusual to my eyes? Trevor and I book into the YMCA (cheap) where I experience the bliss of my first sit-down toilet in 2 months. It feels strange, but at least I could read in comfort! Trev gets his own room while I share the cheaper dormitory with several others. We then spend the afternoon "doing" KL. We gaze in bewilderment at the strange bicultural architecture of the Gothic-come-Muslim Railway Station. We see the City Hall, Federal House, The Shopping Complex - of which KL is very proud, The National Mosque - from which I am unceremoniously evicted because they objected to me exposing my knobbly knees. It seemed like an ostentatious business conference hall, anyway. So unlike the smaller, more intimate and sedate mosques seen elsewhere. We seek refuge in the colour and peace of a Hindu temple, the huge, ornate entrance to which can be seen from most parts of the city. To remove the dust of the city as one removes his shoes to enter this haven must be for a KL Hindu what a psychiatrist's couch is for a harassed Westerner. Thank heavens for (some) religions. The world would surely be a helluva place without their easily accessible crutches and ready made solutions for social control. (You might like to pardon both the puns and the sentiments, if you wish).

Lost as usual we zig-zagged our way through KL's maze of streets, stumbling upon the old (now superseded) National Mosque - a magnificent old structure, slowly but surely being eaten away by KL's pollution. This was,

however, the most magnificent, well presented, well planned, comprehensive and detailed museum I've ever seen... this is how a museum should be! Details I'll leave for later but each section was presented in exquisite detail, reflecting a passion and devotion that was breathtaking. Here we engrossed ourselves in history, culture, customs, art, craftwork, Natural history, geography, economics and industry in a way that encouraged us to ask for more. The wildlife display was fantastic, each animal presented in a lifelike representation of it's natural ecological niche, so real that at times you had to tell yourself that you were in the middle of a city and not in the wilds of Malaysia. The space and effort devoted to the Orang Asli (the dying race of aborigines in the central highlands) could well be noted by our Australian Museums. What an exciting, mysterious, alien race of people they must have been. And how sad that all of this has been so easily lost at the hands - and axes - of "modern" man. The plaintive recording of an Orang Utan accompanying his stuffed likeness bore similar witness to the stupidity of mankind... Surely we can see what we're doing to this planet and reverse it before it's too late?

Suitably sobered, we trudge back to the YMCA where I find (of all people) Brigitte. Her fiance will be in Bangkok in June and she wanted to know my plans 'til then. We decide to travel in Malaysia together. We enjoy each other's company and I get too depressed traveling alone. Besides, I think it's time I taught her some 'Strine! Too buggered to see KL by night (it evidently shuts down by 10 anyway) I crash into bed to read.

PS The sunset was shithouse.

PPS I'm falling apart gradually. Half a molar decided to part company with me, as did the sole of my right sandal. Very sad to see both of them go!

## **Day 62: Thu 15/5/75**

Up early with the intention of getting to know more about this city. And where better to start than at the Museum. I spent another three wonderful hours there, furiously taking notes on everything from seashells and birdlife to local industry and history. I could spend a great deal of my life getting to understand the contents of any one room, let alone the whole place! For a change of pace, Brigitte and I soaked up the peace and quiet offered by the city park. Even this was quite impressive, with a creatively arranged display of tropical flora surrounded by a large man-made lake. Impressive also was the very modern Parliament House - no doubt a waste of taxpayers money, though! On the highest hill in the park is an incredibly large, grotesque monument to "those who have fought and died for freedom"... four machine gun toting soldiers valiantly defending the hill from some unseen enemy, while shielding their fallen comrades. No doubt this was designed with the same spirit of nationalism that still pervades much of Malaysia. This spirit is especially noticeable in KL.

My knees now demurely hidden beneath a pair of jeans, I am allowed into the huge National Mosque. Here there is no alter. There are many pools at which we are asked to wash our shoeless feet. There are people everywhere, many prostrating themselves in prayer before Allah and/or the walls bearing sacred inscriptions. The women, of course, were to remain completely covered and relegated to the rear of the temple. Not a bad religion, this, as long as you're a man!

From here to more food and more random wanderings through the streets. Impressions? Sort of like a Chinese Jakarta without the extremes and extent of that city's poverty, though. Back to the "Y" to observe a splendid sunset from the rooftop then off to the British Council for the Arts to join the European population of KL in enjoying an old - and very good - English comedy called *The Ladykillers*. It was all very proper and civilised. And free! Laurie still hasn't turned up. I hope all is OK with him.

### **Day 63: Fri 16/5/75**

An exciting, traveling day. It's good to be on the move again. We left the "Y" early, catching a bus through, then out of town, getting off as soon as the population density became suitably sparse. We found ourselves hitching beside a ribbon of bitumen extending into the vast green canopy of tropical jungle. Our hitch-hiking luck was sure with us. From West coast to East coast in just four rides!

Our first ride was with a Chinese gent who spoke English but remained mostly silent as he drove us up into the mountains, through lush ferny glades, over precarious bridges suspended over raging rivers, down roads so narrow that the huge trees met overhead turning day into night. Our second ride was with two Malays, one of whom was a dwarf. They took us to Temerloh (?) where we had lunch, checked out the mosque, town and people and attempted to hitch a ride to the coast on a river boat. No-one had ever heard of a boat traveling that far before, so it was back to the dusty road. This was no easy task since the main road was over a mile away, and in the scorching heat of the midday sun those packs became increasingly heavy. Fortunately a smiling Chinaman in a dilapidated Datsun took pity on us, driving us only 5 miles but at least getting us away from the heat of the town.

Our final lift showed up after about an hour of waiting. This took the form of an ancient VW with a well spoken Indian/Malay at the wheel. Since he was a welfare officer in the region he was able to tell us a lot of interesting info not normally so easily accessible. His constant praise of OUR freedoms, way of life, philosophies, etc, indicated the degree of jealousy that many Asians have for the "Western Culture". A jealousy that, on the whole, is repressed or at least modified by their respective governments for it would tend to break down the unquestioning "parental" respect that forms the backbone of so many Asian cultures.

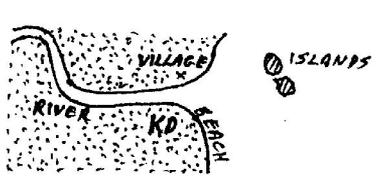
On we drove, down past the timber cutting, through banana groves, past tea growing plantations and rubber estates. Along a road that followed every twist, curve and contortion of the river until we reached Kuantan, on the East coast! Our driver was so obliging and seemed to enjoy our conversation so much (well, mine mostly - Brigitte couldn't understand his brand of English) that he helped set us up in a cheap hotel (noisy and dirty, but very cheap!), bought us drinks and took us on a guided tour of the town, eventually leaving us at the very beautiful Kuantan beach. We found ourselves at last looking out upon the infamous South China Sea. At this point, realising his lack of success in "swerving on" to Brigitte, he parted our company on the pretext of "business". We faced the prospect of walking the two miles back to town in the gathering dusk with shallow enthusiasm and welcomed the arrival of a town bus. This exemplifies the good luck we've had all day. We

reward our thrift with a hearty meal and wearily (though happily) hit the sack early. Two hundred miles at no cost was thrift worthy of reward! What a beautiful country this is proving to be!

## Day 64: Sat 17/5/75

We decided early that Kuantan had little to offer us, so planned to hit the road again. After packing, eating, procrastinating and succumbing to a general laziness, we walked through town in the late morning sun - almost melting into the tar under the weight of our packs. Then came the real ordeal... standing by the incredibly hot roadside, thumbs outstretched in the diminishing hope that someone will take pity on us. Eventually a young Malay takes us about a mile further down the road. At least here there is a little shade. We stand here for about an hour (seems like a lifetime!) and are just about to give up (or die from exposure!) when a life-saving ride is offered to us. He is going to the small river town of Kemaman (near Chukai). With music blaring we sit back and soak up the countryside. Past acres of coconut and rubber plantations, the land is barren and flat in places but can suddenly change into thick tropical rain forest whenever we veer inland. We reached Kemaman about one o'clock - a sleepy little village clinging precariously to a muddy river bank. There is little to do or see here, except to eat and drink which, of course, we did! After the frustration of this morning's efforts at hitchhiking, we decide to succumb to the proffered comfort of a bus ride to Kuala Dungun where we plan to spend the night.

Since the road now stayed away from the immediate coastline we got to see more of the rugged coastal jungle that I've heard so much about. Actually we could only see the first 3 feet of jungle, beyond which the eye could not penetrate due to the all-but-opaque barrier of vines and leaves. The bus driver was a maniac... flat out all the way, we were off our seat more than on it, with our hearts more in our mouths than in our chests! However, it proved more interesting than a car ride for several reasons: 1) it took longer, 2) the behaviour of people in the confines of a crowded bus provided some unexpected insights. For example, Islam women would rather stand than ask someone to move over. 3) Since the bus would often go off the main road to call at the many coastal villages, we got to see them close up. Most are dirty, old and quite poor relative to the rest of Malaysia, but the people seem to be happy enough. The girls in particular are quite flirtatious.



Two and a half hours later we pull into the peaceful little town of Kuala Dungun and check into one of the two "lodging houses" there. No motorbikes, no cars, no noise... everyone is asleep by ten. And what a perfect location... Right on the mouth of a sheltered river where the fishing boats moor by a golden, palm covered ocean beach, overlooking a small group of islands just

offshore. All it lacked was a decent surf! Needless to say, it didn't take us long to discover the sea-breeze cool and calm of the beach. Boy, I've missed the ocean lately. We walked, talked, sat and soaked in the South China Sea. The scene was straight out of a glossy travel brochure... the palms, the soft warm sand, the crystal clear water, the dark-skinned children playing happily by the drying nets draped over the beached fishing boats while the fishermen sat and talked in preparation for the night's toil. Yes it was all there... right down to the old-style native village across the river mouth. We sat on that beach until 8:30, witnessing a myriad small lights both on and off shore appear brighter as darkness descended. A tremendous ending to a wonderful but tiring day. We ate an enormous fish meal - what else would one eat in a town like this? - and drifted off to sleep feeling good to be beside Mother Ocean once again...

### **Day 65: Sun 18/5/75**

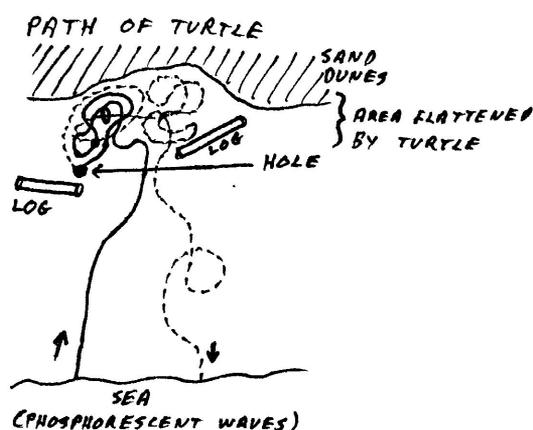
What a magnificent day! After a beautiful, peaceful night we checked out of our hotel early, leaving behind most of our stuff. Taking only food and water we caught the local bus up the coast. About 10 miles north of KD we reached our destination - a very small fishing village of about 30 people, called Rantau Abang. We had heard that it is here that between the months of May and August each year Leathery Turtles come ashore to lay their eggs. This, then was our quest - to witness an event that I had only seen on film or read about in books. Arriving in the heat of the mid-day sun we found ourselves in the middle of a 9 mile long beach, complete with palm trees, crystalline waters and golden sands, of course. Hiking north for about half a mile we felt completely isolated from the rest of humanity. We discovered an abandoned fisherman's hut in which to stay but spent the rest of the sun-drenched day sheltering beneath a nearby pandanus, eating, writing, reading, singing, talking, playing music, etc, with frequent excursions into the cool comfort of the clear, crystalline waters which lap gently on this most beautiful of coasts. What a day!



We saw fish, dolphins, a whale, sea eagles, sand lizards, sea shells of exquisite variation and fishermen perching on what must be the smallest fishing boats I've ever seen... about 10 feet long with gunter rig, paddle, rudder and crude anchor they venture forth onto the unpredictable ocean in these things, miles from shore. To see them wafting slowly towards OUR shore, colourful sails billowing before a gentle breeze was a tremendous sight. And with the villagers so friendly and helpful we felt that surely this must be paradise. Our tropical bliss extended well into the night as we dozed beneath our starry ceiling, a waxing half-moon leading the rest of heaven in its slow, silent westward march, the whole parade being reflected in reverse on the not so silent ocean surface. At 10 o'clock we began our search for turtles. South for

an hour without luck. Then north again. At 11.10 we saw the tell-tale tractor-like tracks heading from the ocean. Excitedly following them we at last encountered a most magnificent sight - the massive bulk of a grey-blue turtle. We danced with delight!

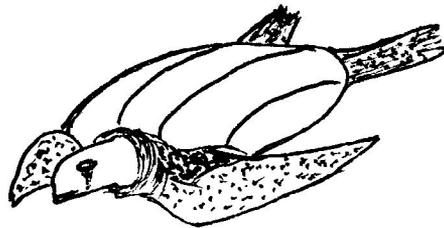
In the clearness of the moonlit night - aided only occasionally by our torches - we examined this giant creature. About two and a half metres from head to tail, 2 metres between the tips of her flippers and of seemingly inestimable bulk. Her shell had an extremely tough leathery texture (hence the name) with her skin being only a little softer. Her face bore a fixed expression which was easy to interpret as sheer determination. Her watery eyes seemed unblinkingly fixed on her goal... a patch of sand suitable for her to lay her eggs, driven by some internal program set into her brain eons ago. Here was a behaviour pattern so strong that nothing could deviate her from her predetermined path. She huffed and puffed her laborious way up the beach, stopping frequently to allay her obvious exhaustion. The incredible noise that she made could best be described as a large person about to throw up. This sound just added to the pathos of the scene of an animal so obviously out of her natural environment. Every slight movement was such a REAL effort for her.



On reaching the top of the beach she flattened a sizeable area of sand, eventually pausing before digging a 3 foot deep hole using only her hind flippers and tail. What an effort. And what patience. We observed all of this from nearly IN the hole! While all this was going on, 2 locals arrived to collect the eggs, which they sell for a mere 10 cents each. Even though some were destined for the Government hatcheries the sight of such plundering saddened us greatly. We felt as if these two boys had invaded a very private and special moment. We felt sad at the innocence of the turtle, blindly going through all of this pain and effort merely so a few dollars can be made! The eggs were laid in groups of 2 or 3, all 106 of them. As soon as they hit the sand they were retrieved by the fishermen. Leathery, soft, white, translucent spheres they were about 1-2 inches in diameter and covered in mucus. They seemed very tough. Her egg laying duty over, the turtle carefully and

deliberately filled in the hole using only her back flippers. She didn't even turn around to see the results of her efforts... probably fortunately, given the fate of this particular batch of potential progeny! Her head remained facing landwards, eyes watery, expression fixed. As she slowly stomped down the sand which was to nurture her now-absent offspring we purchased 10 eggs and, when the other two had left, placed them carefully in the hole, hopefully to complete their natural life cycle.

The hole now covered over, she spent a good 30 minutes further flattening and "disguising" the area using those incredibly strong front flippers. Eventually she headed seawards once more, with the occasional detour on the way, but her ungainly, cumbersome bulk at last found itself at home - in the ocean. What a graceful exit after such an awkward display of motherhood! From go to whoa the whole process took 2 hours - 2 exhausting, struggling, bellowing, groaning, grunting, instinct-driven hours. Heading home (now 1 o'clock) we pass 6 more turtles, their eggs also raided by locals. The turtles were, however, being tagged (OURS was 118271) providing a vague hope that perhaps something WAS being done to help preserve this most ugly, beautiful species. Man really is unthinking and selfish, measuring the worth of everything in terms of dollars and cents.



What an unforgettable experience. The moon was now setting and the lightning in the Northern sky looked threatening so we sought the shelter of our little hut and the gratification of a welcome sleep.

### **Day 66: Mon 19/5/75**

A quiet, relaxing, uneventful day after the excitement of yesterday. Needless to say we awoke fairly late (9 o'clock) and immediately refreshed ourselves in the clear, cool, blueness of the sea. Delaying our planned departure time was easy with such distracting pleasures as sunbaking, swimming, writing and talking to divert us and provide us with an excuse to linger at this most idyllic spot. Eventually, the time came to head back to KD. In keeping with our incredible luck we stood but 5 minutes hitching in the warm tropical drizzle before being picked up by a local fisherman in his battered old truck. Both the truck and its owner reeked of fish but we didn't mind at all since this driver was the most patient and safest we'd yet encountered. He dropped us 2 miles out of KD and we enjoyed the pleasant walk through the outlying parts of the town, talking with the people with whom we sheltered first from the intermittent showers, then from the heat - a changeable climate, this! Most were amazed to hear of so many turtles appearing so early in the season. Must have been our good luck, again!

Once again to the beach, where I was able to demonstrate my dubious prowess as a beach-soccer player. I found that if I could bring the opposition to a standstill by making them laugh so hard at my feeble attempts at kicking the ball, I had some chance at scoring. But these attempts merely brought forth more guffaws, and no points! Watching the sun set from an eastern shore brought back pleasant memories of home. In fact, if it weren't for the palm trees, this beautiful spot could easily be mistaken for Australia... then again, maybe not. I've grown so used to palm leaf-thatched houses on stilts, dark-skinned, grinning people, native tropical flora, warm deep blue/green waters, etc, that perhaps the presence of even one of these ingredients on an Australian coastline may seem odd. Regardless of these musings, I began again to think of home. I'm very happy and content in my mind at my decision to head home after Thailand. There is still a lot of the world to see but my ties (emotional and otherwise) will always be with my family and friends at home.

Anyway, the sun has set on yet another beautiful day. We ate a hearty meal - the rice and fish diet on the beach soon got a little predictable - and enjoyed a much needed fresh water wash before the obligatory reading and writing and, of course, blissful slumber...

## **Day 67: Tue 20/5/75**

Up by 7 to catch the bus to the little village of Bukit Besi, about 25 miles inland from Dungun. The ride took us through heavily forested country but climbed only slightly. This as a great pity because we had hoped that we would be well into mountainous country this far in from the coast. Our arrival surprised both the locals and us... We expected a small mountain village surrounded by thick rain forest, but what did we find? A huge semi-abandoned open cut tin mine with its accompanying town. Or should I say accompanying ghost town. The only inhabitants appeared to be a guard, his family and a small stall to serve the bus drivers. I don't know why, but there are two buses a day to this place. We appeared to be the only passengers they had for quite some time! What an eerie feeling, walking in the blistering heat through abandoned streets, backyards, huge, barren clearings, tons of idle equipment and NOT A SOUL IN SIGHT! In our imagination we could easily hear and see the activity of hundreds of workers and their families trying to wrench a paltry living from this heat baked earth. The railway lines buckling under the weight of overburdened ore trucks. While from the now silent town itself would emanate more familiar sounds as women and children went about their daily tasks. We stared at the now-rusty, broken teeth of once-proud, shiny mechanical monsters which spent much of their lives tearing into the very heart of this impassively yielding mountain. We took heart at the observation that Mother Nature was slowly but surely reclaiming this huge scar. The jungle was slowly encroaching from every side. Birds (mainly starlings) had already occupied almost every available niche. Snakes and lizards slithered silently amongst the twisted metal. We saw several snakes, including a black cobra - very venomous, but luckily more wary of our intrusion than we were of it.

This quarry was actually an unexpected diversion on our way to our planned destination - Bukit Lantor, on the Dungun River. We had heard that this was the place to find Orang Asli tribes. We were, however, to be disappointed for several reasons: 1) There are very few, if any, Orang Asli left, especially in this part of Malaysia. (The quarry and the extensive timber cutting gave us a few hints why!). 2) The country here is hardly "mountainous". 3) To walk 10 miles to the river, over unmarked tracks in dense jungle and searing heat would be the height of madness. We had, naively, anticipated cool, well-trod mountain paths! While our original aim remained unfulfilled, the trip was certainly not wasted. We got to see aspects of Malaysia rarely seen by more conventional tourists. We even got to forge a few (short) trails through virgin jungle. One such trail was in pursuit of a white-handed gibbon - whom we heard, but unfortunately could not see, despite our frantic efforts. We did, however, see many tropical birds - woodpeckers, warblers, mynas, one magnificent Sultan's Tit (pardon the expression), several varieties of

kingfishers and one most spectacular red, black, orange and yellow hornbill, sitting majestically high in the tangled green canopy.

Having no water (we expected "kindly villagers" also) and not really wishing to end our lives just yet, we headed back to the kiosk at the quarry where we also managed to get a lift back to the "main road". From here we soon hitched a ride on the school bus back to Dungun where we sought welcome relief from the incessant heat under the cool, cool showers. It was too hot even for the beach!



Another snap decision sees us heading north once again, peering at this now-familiar coastline through the grimy windows of the local bus. The coast seems to get even more beautiful as we get further north, with multitudes of islands just offshore exposing their pristine, white sands through the green of their palms and lawns. Their iridescent-blue lagoons framed by glistening gold and white beaches providing perfect havens for the white high-stemmed fishing boats patiently waiting for their owners to emerge from their nearby picture-postcard, palm-thatched huts. Superlatives fail such scenes as these. They are real, aren't they? Words don't exist that could successfully describe the range of blues and greens that colour this ocean. You'll just have to see it for yourself!

By late afternoon we reach Kuala Terengganu, walk around comparing hotel prices and eventually check into a grotty but cheap one near the centre of town. Nearby is where they hold their annual 3-day beach festival in celebration of the rice harvest. It starts on Friday, so we hope to extend our visas long enough to be able to attend. We check out the town, wash the dirt from our weary bodies, eat a scrumptious meal under the stars and take in a movie - *The Exorcist*. This was quite an experience... crowded and hot, with fans clattering uselessly overhead and an extremely distorted sound system making it very difficult to follow the dialogue. Also, I missed the middle of the movie due to the Aussie guy next to me fainting. I had to carry him outside and remain with him until his colour returned. He was as white as a sheet! I guess it was a combination of the stifling environment and the sometimes-disturbing scenes in the movie.

AN UNCONNECTED THOUGHT: It seems to me that much of the effort at scientific investigation, argumentation and just plain old "truth seeking" is

aimed at finding GENERALISATIONS suitable for describing the various phenomena of the world. Maybe this is done in an attempt to conceptualise the complexities of the Universe through diminution or reduction via simplification. In my mind the question now arises concerning the validity of this approach. Is the basic assumption - that generalisations actually DO exist - valid? If so, how can it be proved? This is important, since maybe all rational/scientific endeavour is barking up the wrong tree. Many people are too quick to say "Mankind does such-and-such", or "The heavens obey Newton's Laws", or "Turtles come ashore in June". All such statements are attempts to simplify (through generalisation) a complex behavioural or phenomenological event that may in fact be UNABLE to ever be simplified. Thus I wish to question the basic assumption underlying what I refer to as the philosophy of "phenomenological reductionism" since maybe there are NO generalisable patterns in the universe... maybe? (Or is that last statement the only generalisation that exists?)

Struth I can rave on!

### **Day 68: Wed 21/5/75**

The first REAL tropical rain I've experienced. Boy, how can the sky hold so much water!? We woke up at 8. Saw the heavens opening up and went straight back to bed! We eventually emerged, driven by our growling stomachs, at about 10:30, braving the torrents of filthy water hurtling down the streets. With nothing to see or do we sought the shelter of a friendly restaurant from where we watched the miserable procession of dripping-wet people while we slowly consumed a wonderful breakfast-come-lunch. Then reluctantly off to Imigrasi where we spend a harrowing hour and a half attempting visa renewals. The interminable questions, insinuations, cross examinations, etc, that we had to go through made us feel most unwelcome. We both could only get one extra week in Malaysia. What a drag... but we might try again in Kota Baharu, depending on how we feel then. And to top it off, at the end of all this hassle, with all of the accusations of "immoral, lying hippies", the pompous official had the gall to wish us an enjoyable stay in Malaysia! So once again we seek shelter (from both rain and officialdom!) in our hotel room where we while away the afternoon reading ("A Pattern of Islands"), writing, and generally filling in the time talking about anything and everything.

Brigette's English has improved markedly since I first met her (yet she still insists on exploring the Malaysian "chungle!"). She has traveled widely and most of her stories have served to whet my appetite for further travel - but not alone; I don't think I could stand the loneliness of it. I hope that Glenny really wants to share such wonderful experiences with me. Brigette and I get on so well together. In a lot of ways (temper, background, etc) she reminds me of my sister Cathy. It will be a shame to have to part company in Bangkok where she intends to re-meet her fiance... the anticipation of which increasingly occupies her thoughts.

If my plane from Australia had landed first in K. Trengganu then perhaps my impressions of this town would fill pages. Now, having experienced so many Asian towns, it becomes but another... so similar to the rest, especially in Malaysia, that it rates only a few lines. Busy, dirty, smelly and in places gaudy. These are the sights, sounds and smells that are Asia which by now to me are so intoxicating in their variable richness. Good or bad, I never seem to tire of the experience!

## **Day 69: Thu 22/5/75**

*Success is getting what you want. Happiness is wanting what you get...*  
- an old Seikh saying.

This festival had better be worth the time spent waiting for it! We checked out of the bug-infested hotel and caught the bus to Batu Burok, the site of the aforementioned festival. Our intention was to find a place to stay before the expected rush tomorrow. Ah well, the best laid plans of mice and men... nowhere to stay, except on the beach. This would be fine for us, but what about our stuff? We reluctantly decide to return to Trenganu but we first check out the extensive beach. Many people were already there, setting up their stalls in the best places. The beach is perfect... the shade of the palm and fir trees extends almost to the water's edge. By the amount of preparation they seem to be expecting thousands! So, after having a great time chatting with the local school kids, some of whom being keen to show off their excellent English, we bus it back to Trenganu. Here we decide to change hotels, intending to leave our stuff there for a couple of days which we'll spend on the beach. This plan, of course, meant that we would have one more day in Treng. Not a stimulating prospect at the best of times. I'm feeling a bit crook with a few swollen lymph glands so the rest of the afternoon is spent "at ease" in the local park, watching the world go by. A detour by the PO and markets proves to be most interesting. The markets seem to sell anything and everything... fish, fruits of all kinds, food galore, clothes from all over, toys, medicines, spices. You name it, they sell it. The olfactory cacophony of smells in this place would delight even the most insensitive of nostrils - utterly incredible!

In the park by the river we quietly watch the sun go down. Sunset is when Nature really shows off, I'm sure. Are the sunsets in Asia really more beautiful than those in Australia, or is this the first time in my life that I have taken the opportunity to really look? A peaceful, unhurried stroll along the river sidewalk provides us with unexpected pleasures... The small, old wooden ferries putt-putting their way across the river to idyllic fishing villages nestled in the palms on the opposite shore. The town's lights flickering into life as the sun hands over possession of the cloud-spotted sky to the near-full moon and its star-like companion of the night, Venus. We witness a motley circus procession of bizarre animals, sculpted in cloud: There, a turtle. Over there, an elephant, or is it a crocodile eating a chook... no, now it's a huge frog. Our eyes adjust to the blink blink blink of the navigation lights guiding the last of the day's fishing craft to their river haven, safe from the ravages of an unpredictable though now-calm ocean. The warmth of the on-deck fires does not reach us, but we experience it nonetheless as the fisher-families prepare their evening meals at anchor in the quiet bay.

It is dark now and the last of the ferries has chugged its time-worn way to the far shore... its hollow putt-putt sounds dying with the distance but its lone white light still challenging Venus for dominance of the dark. A feeble and short lived victory, I muse. We sit for quite a while on the day-warmed wharf, each lost in our own far-off, rarely revealed worlds of thought. My mind wanders through the immensities of space, the complexities of time, the purpose, if any, of Life... My thoughts are like free agents. It is a freedom I cherish greatly. Inside my head is truly a world like no other. And it is mine. With it I can, within a few minutes, return home, to be with the ones I love. Or I can travel the world, learning of life. Or I can sail the Seven Seas in any boat I wish. Or my sore bum can interrupt and remind me that I am really sitting on a concrete pier somewhere in Asia!

Our silence betrays our inner meanderings and we leave to eat. I feel refreshed, enlivened, reborn. I need these impromptu reflective moments. Especially in such a setting as this. No, my now-high, joyous mood does not deflate when I turn my back on the river in search of sustenance for my temporal being... it is enriched further by what is to follow...

We order our soup at a small roadside stall and are immediately urged to join a skinny, middle-aged Chinese gent at his table - inside a nearby restaurant, nonetheless. He speaks little English so we communicate either via the waitress or in Malay, a language in which my proficiency is at best questionable. He pays for our soup, buys us drinks, buys Brigitte 2 packets of cigarettes, offers to drive us around the city to see the sights, offers to put us up in the most expensive hotel in town, to wine and dine us at the local nightclub and to give us an "authentic" Malay meal in his home the following night. We are so overcome with this display of seemingly unmotivated generosity that we accept the first three of his offers but reject the rest. As I said, we could communicate poorly, we've seen all there is to see in this city, we have no desire to go to a nightclub (nor do we possess the right clothes!). Besides, we won't be here tomorrow if all goes to plan. He was crestfallen. Rarely does one encounter such generosity, with NOTHING expected in return. Even though we all but insisted on paying he pointedly refused. We parted company after two joyous hours spent eating and drinking at his expense. A fine ending to a fine day!

## **Day 70: Fri 23/5/75**

The Festival at last! In one way it was disappointing, in other ways, however, it was fascinating. We bussed to the beach early. A few thousand others had the same idea, using every possible mode of transport available. Already there are hundreds of grass/thatch/cardboard/tin/plastic huts/shelters/lean-to's littering the beach. In fact, almost obliterating it! The atmosphere is one of fevered anticipation as the stalls, shops and side-shows quickly take form. Many of the people are from country areas, journeying "into town" only rarely, so this is their time to let their hair down in celebration of the harvest. The theme of it all reminds me of the Easter Show in its earlier years, before it was spoiled by more commercial motives. As the day rolled on, so did the festivities... this place is no Bali, though! There was little spontaneity. The people seemed content to remain as spectators, rarely involving themselves in the fun as did the Balinese. It was in this way that the celebration was disappointing. It was TOO MUCH like the kind of festival we would have back home. Not at all what I had hoped for. Sure, we saw top spinning (kid stuff, though) and a bit of the famous kite flying. We even saw the chubby Sultan of Trengganu parade regally up and down the beach on his magnificent horse. Also we witnessed the entrancing showmanship of the snake charmer who appeared to charm the rapt audience more than his snakes. And we tried in vain to struggle through the milling throngs to see a cock fight. Thankfully they are a little more humane here than in Bali. No spurs or fighting to the death. The variety of odours and tastes in the food was awe inspiring, as was its cheapness. I think we sampled something from every possible region in Malaysia!

The people were very dressed up, mainly in Western style clothes. The girls were in their grandest finery, and paraded constantly before anyone (male, preferably) who might care to look. They seemed very interested in showing off to the one white male on the beach, me. I, of course, was impressed. I couldn't help but make comparison between the way these girls displayed their wares and the sales techniques of the jewellery seller or the Batik salesman. We spent a good deal of time just sitting, watching. Soaking it all in. We slowly became more and more intoxicated with the sights, colours and sounds. Loudspeakers blared their distorted messages, bells jingled, drums beat, people trying to talk above the row. Children were screaming, sometimes with joy, other times because they were temporarily lost. There were the inevitable cane juice makers chugging away, competing with the motorcycles in trying to outdo the din. We stood for some time, amazed at the antics and the incessant line of patter put on by one particular gent selling an enormous array of "Miracle Drugs". And the smells... nuts roasting, bananas frying, corn grilling, noodles simmering, fruit just sitting there temptingly, ice cream dripping invitingly, fish pervading, fresh bread beckoning.

All day this went on. Thousands more arrived. Many, like us, coming to watch everybody else. Most were Malays. There were no Indians and few Chinese. And not all were country folk. With all of this activity, evening seemed to arrive too soon but at least it bore the promise of some sort of "cultural" activity... some local dancing or music. Such Bali-inspired expectations were not to be fulfilled. What did we see? 1) An open air (Western) movie, 2) a Malay pop group singing highly amplified versions of European and American songs from about 5 years ago. They did this while dressed to the nines, short hair and all, in front of a highly attentive audience from a stage brightly illuminated by neon lights displaying the symbol of the sponsoring cigarette company... so this is Malay culture? 3) Nearby, doing a roaring trade beside the cassette stall was - yes, you guessed it - my first sight of a hot dog and hamburger stand in Asia!

It looks like the talons of Western capitalism have well and truly broken the skin in Malaysia. I saw its beginnings in Bali, its early progression in Java, its epitome in Singapore, and here it is beginning to transform an ancient festival into yet another marketing exercise. Such a pity, really, but the new generation appears to have no desire to perpetuate its country's traditions, preferring instead to succumb to the temptations of capitalism and its dubious material benefits. I have no doubt that such a desire is short sighted and will eventually prove devastating, but who am I to dictate the future of a culture. I can't help feeling that freedom of choice is only viable when ALL consequences of a particular choice are known in advance. Some hope! It appears that the next two days and nights will resemble today. If so, I see no reason to extend our stay.

The gathering dusk slowly transformed the scene on the beach... The sun was ever so slowly pursued over the horizon by a spectacular Venus, leaving a now full moon to dominate the darkening sky. The brightness of the moon cast clear, elongate shadows on the sands as the previously dispersed masses of people gathered in groups, often around fires, to eat and share the day's events. The unmistakable cooking sounds found themselves competing with a growing cacophony of noise which if anything was increasing as still more people came to experience the festivities in the cool of the night. All along the beach lights flickered, reminding me of some huge, fallen Christmas tree, alive with miniature people! Our plan was to spend the night in one of the many huts offered to us during the day but the night air was so still, the moonlight so bright and the sky so clear that we decided to sleep under the stars. So we walked a half mile or so down the beach, spread out our towels and settled down for a good night's sleep.

First interruption: A bunch of small boys decide to play a night long game of soccer. It seemed of no concern to them that we were trying to sleep in the middle of their field! So we move elsewhere.

Second interruption: The beach is really alive with people enjoying the moonlight, the water, the beach, the atmosphere and guess what else they've just discovered? Two mad Europeans asleep on the beach! Mum, Dad, quick, come and look at this! Brigitte suggests that we charge admission. If we did we'd both soon be rich! So again we move. It's now after midnight.

Third interruption: Thunder (that's OK), lightning (OK), rain (not OK). We seek shelter but have no luck at this hour so we hike into town to re-check into our hotel.

It's 2am now. Nowhere are there any rooms vacant. "There's a Festival on didn't you know?". What to do? We try the bus station. Can't sleep there, it's even noisier than the beach. The park? Same story. So we grab a passing trishaw and head back to the beach where, with the rain almost stopped, we find a friendly tree, curl up beneath it on the hard, cold, wet and gritty sand and catch a few hours of welcome sleep... at least I did. Brigitte couldn't sleep at all. Dawn came too quickly and with it renewed activity and noise as the people gear up for day 2 of the festivities. Some of them pause for a short time in their daily tasks to stare at two hippies huddled pitifully beneath a still dripping tree. A circle of fascinated mumblers forms around us. We fake sleep...

## **Day 71: Sat 24/5/75**

Eventually it becomes impossible to pretend any more, so up we get, clearing the sand from our ears, eyes, noses, hair, mouths, etc. As we wound our way back through the milling throngs it seemed that our "fame" as beach sleepers had spread. Nearly everyone on the beach greets us warmly. It's as if they enjoyed seeing us share their way of life even for just a night. We hang around for a couple of hours but eventually decide that we've seen all there is to see, so decide to move on. So we hitch back to town for the last time, pack our stuff and catch the 11am bus to Jerteh. It is with happy hearts and heavy eyelids that we head North once again.

The road soon heads inland and follows the foothills of a huge mountain range. To our left we see mountains disappearing into the clouds, covered with tangled masses of thick tropical jungle, forever moist and appearing impenetrable, an appearance soon contraindicated by the several scars where greed for timber has found a way to penetrate! Rainforest timber is a major industry here, along with rubber, tin (many open cut mines are visible from the bus), bananas, oil palms and, on the coast, of course, fishing. It was a welcome relief from the monotonous openness of the coast to be traveling through the shade of tall, high-branched rainforest trees. The roads are very bad, luckily making sleep impossible. Luckily? Yes, because to miss seeing so many sights, and especially the tiny impoverished villages clinging so precariously to the banks of the muddy rivers, would have been an opportunity gone to waste.

From Jerteh we bus it to Kuala Besut, another river town on the coast. From the shimmering beach we stare longingly at a pair of islands described by many as "the most beautiful in the world". Indeed they do look magnificent and are no doubt exceptionally beautiful, but I suspect there would be many islands, especially in Polynesia, that would justifiably vie for that particular epithet. Besut reminds us of so many other coastal river towns that we've seen, and since we have neither the time nor the money to visit the islands, we head back to Jerteh where, as our luck would have it, we make an instant connection with the bus to Kota Baharu, on the Thai border, yet!

Arriving just on nightfall we check into a very cheap but terrific hotel where we gleefully wash the sand and grime of the last few days from our bodies and clothes, devour a couple of plates of mee goreng and collapse happily into bed. We are almost too tired to sleep! But only almost...

## **Day 72: Sun 25/5/75**

A happy day, this one! For breakfast we sample the many varieties of bread on offer, then catch the bus to Pantai Cinta Berahi, which translates into the incredibly romantic name of "Beach of Passion and Love". (Can you imagine renaming Harbord Beach?). The bus ride shows us yet another of Malaysia's many faces, that of the Malaysian "suburbia". None of your well kept, neatly mown lawns and tenderly grown flowers here, though. Here a typical suburban house consists of a one room dwelling (in which sleeping, eating and cooking are done) set amid a grove of coconut trees. Most houses are on stilts and the rich alluvial soil provides nourishment for an abundance of crops... cabbages, tomatoes, beans, nuts, palm, rubber, etc. Even corn! Eventually we reach the beach. Of course we should have known that it could not possibly have lived up to its overly-romantic name, but we were shocked by the level of pollution that greeted us. Surely in times past it must have been lovely - palms, golden sand, blue water, etc. But now? Dirt, plastic bags, cans, paper and assorted rubbish all around the multitude of houses and stalls on the beach. All bearing silent testimony to the hopelessly inadequate disposal system. The water itself is unclean, being close to the outfall of the giant Kelantan River into which much of the effluent and rubbish from KB and other river towns is discarded. We have seen many floating toilets in these towns where everyone just craps directly into the river. By walking a half mile up the beach we escaped much of the land-based filth, but still its presence in the air and water reminded us constantly of its presence. All this aside (it's easy to block one's mind to unpleasant things if you practice it!) we enjoyed the perfect weather of a perfect day and lavished the joys of sun, sand and lack of surf on ourselves for several glorious hours.

Our souls rejuvenated, we return to the city where we catch up on the three R's of the weary traveller, (w)riting, reading and relaxing. On the way home from the bus station we detoured via the markets, an unbelievable 2-storey conglomeration of EVERYTHING. Most I've seen in markets before but never in such a compact form. Upstairs we enjoyed a meal at real Asian prices... ie, very cheap. I suspect the cheapness of the food is to compensate for the filth, noise and cramped eating place! Space was so tight that many of the vendors sat ON the tables, surrounded by their wares! They all seemed so shocked to see US in such surroundings that they treated us like royalty!

Out in the street we witnessed a sight that surprised both of us, perhaps because it was so unexpected in "affluent" Malaysia. There on the main street sat several women so filthy that it was difficult to discern skin from clothing, selling meat - complete, butchered carcasses of sheep, cow, water buffalo and horse. These carcasses were lying directly ON the road, exposed to the dirt, pollution, sun and flies. It appeared that the main function of the women was to prevent the meat from being run over by continually dragging it out of the

way of the traffic! This dried up, flyblown, foul smelling meat probably formed a significant part of the lunch we had just eaten. My God, what a thought! Isolated cases of such unhygienic practice I've seen before, but the whole bloody town buys its meat here!

Anyway, we eat tea early (carefully avoiding any meat) and proceed to check out the town in the cool of the evening. The night market, the stalls, the shops, the streets... oh well, yet another Asian town. Perhaps a little dirtier and poorer than most other Malaysian towns but unmistakably Asian. One thing we do notice is the increasing Thai influence and the decreasing Chinese influence. The theme is still mainly Malay - and Muslim! The similarities between Islam and Christianity are apparent at several levels - from philosophy to practice. Islam is not a very uplifting or happy religion. Nor is it very open, unlike Hindu or Buddhism in these respects. I would not like to be a woman in a Moslem country!

AN ASIDE: Since Bali I have had many opportunities to see more, to think more and to hear more from others. Consequently many of my ideas have altered considerably. One area in which my thoughts have changed is to do with beggars and begging. So disregard now all that I have previously said on the matter. I now realise that I was wrong. We all find it hard to abandon a point of view when personal sacrifice is required! However, with experience comes new perspectives, and with new perspectives, old prejudices dissolve. I can now, with pseudo-Christian certainty, put myself fairly and squarely into the shoes (if he has any) of the beggar and ask myself "would this 20 cents make my life better or happier?" Invariably the answer - short-sighted though it may be - is "yes". So, if I'm in a position where I can afford to give a small sum to some poor soul eking out a living in some putrid gutter, then I do. Ironically, it took the shock of seeing so many blind beggars in Malaysia (there are thousands!) to open my own eyes to this. I am now much happier in myself. This quandary of how to deal with begging has been nagging at me for some time now. A man can sit back comfortably philosophising and speculating about things for his whole life and NEVER ACTUALLY DO ANYTHING. I want not to be such a man!

### **Day 73: Mon 6/5/75**

We're on the move again. Whoopee! After waking, we spend our last dollar (literally!) on breakfast and wait for the bank to open at 10. While waiting, we took the opportunity to have a last look at this intriguing town. This level of filth would not be tolerated in a SLUM in Sydney, but here it is pervasive. Apart from the filth, this is a good place. So far it remains a "passing through" town for tourists, so the people are not yet spoiled by the crass pursuit of the tourist dollar. They are still very courteous and friendly. The sound of "Hello Joe!" greets us everywhere we go.

Banking done, PO checked, hotel paid and left, we board the bus to Kuala Kerai, 60 miles south (yes, SOUTH!) of KB. The trip provides us with much the same scenery as Saturday's journey except that here, sharing dominance with the ubiquitous rubber plantations, are the rice paddies. We've not seen so many rice fields since leaving Indonesia. Kuala Kerai is on the very edge of the mountain ranges, which we hope to penetrate somehow in our everlasting, and so far vain, efforts to find untouched, virgin jungle (or "chungle", as Brigitte puts it). Being at the end of a dead-end road, K Kerai is a sleepy, quiet and relatively clean little town, surrounded by lush, green mountains, hugging the steep banks of the river Kelantan. It is to the river that we make our way first in an attempt to discover how we go about getting a boat to take us further inland. "Mid-day tomorrow, very cheap!". We decide to wait. The little river boat will take us as far as Dabong which, being a railroad and river village will provide us with a few alternatives if we wish to pursue further our penetration of Malaysia's interior. Asking such inquiries of simple river folk who understand not a word of English is usually an experience of great joy, with laughter for all concerned. Somehow communication happens and the difficulties in arriving at a mutual understanding often lead to a brief but warm relationship that would never occur if we were able to communicate perfectly. Maybe the medium IS really the message after all!

Though the town is very small, it sports a museum and a zoo that we visited more out of curiosity than expectation of something worthwhile. How wrong could we be! The museum part was OK, but nothing special. Just stuffed animals, most of which we'd seen before, doing little more than providing food for the termites that infested the display cases. The little zoo out the back, however, was a surprise. Here we walked with gibbons and macaques on long chains through the well-treed grounds. Eagles of many species eyed us suspiciously as we wandered past their well kept cages. A huge black bear was so close that we could have touched him - had we dared! We found ourselves surrounded by antelopes, hornbills, turtles, snakes, all of which were in good health and very well displayed. I especially enjoyed playing at being a tree to a beautiful, tame young gibbon. His grip was so sure and

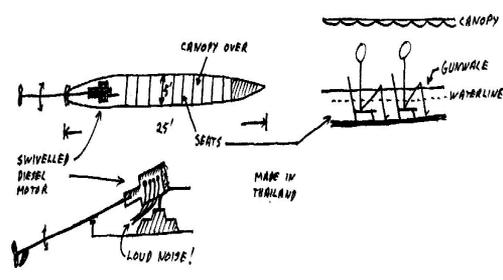
gentle while he displayed his agility and strength in a display of acrobatics that left us feeling as ungainly as a beached turtle! He would run up to me, climb up to my neck and give me a huge hug whenever I ventured near his tree. Needless to say, I spent some time near that tree!

After the zoo, we ate (we have money, now!) and checked into yet another hotel (that looks just like all the rest!). Then off to find some "chungle". This proved to be quite an experience. We would wander around until we found a likely looking track, then we would follow it. Great plan, huh? These tracks led us to leech infested rubber plantations, across rickety old one-at-a-time bridges, past fishermen up to their necks in the muddy creeks, tirelessly casting their nets for the few fish able to survive in such conditions. Over there we see a scorpion darting for cover. Up ahead we see several snakes crossing the path but they slither off before being identified. We trudge through acres of broad-leaved *Mimosa pudica*. We squelch our way through muddy banana groves and encounter more dilapidated bridges.

We wander self-consciously through the backyards of some very poor mountain dwellers. How their shacks are still standing is a mystery... they look as if they would collapse if you passed by too quickly! The snotty nosed children run to the door to view the white intruders. Some run back in fear, others to get their parents and friends. The rest just stare with bulging brown eyes. My fears of being ousted by some irate property owner proved unfounded as the people seemed genuinely pleased to have us walk over THEIR land. They would fire directions at us in a most helpful manner - even though we had nowhere in particular we wanted to go! Many houses had guard dogs which were beaten unmercifully by their owners when they saw it was US they were barking at... not quite appropriate training for a guard dog, I would have thought! We eventually reached a twilight impasse at the edge of an old Chinese graveyard. Seated on the freshly heaped mound of a recently departed soul, surrounded by the offerings of sacred paper, incense, cigarettes and now-evaporated tea, we viewed a wall of thick jungle and listened to the far off cries of uncaged animals... Maybe tomorrow...

## Day 74: Tue 27/5/75

And what a tomorrow it was! We spent the morning seeing more of the town and its friendly people, talking and, of course, eating. At 11 o'clock we walk to the river where we are ushered aboard a sleek, low river boat heading for Dabong. As soon as we are seated the boat zooms off upriver carrying a large cargo of local people, rice, supplies, one pig, a goat, several chickens and, perched uncomfortably in the middle of all this, ourselves and our bulky backpacks. What a marvelously well-adapted river boat this is...



...the powerful and very noisy motor could drive the long, narrow, shallow-draft hull at surprising speed, with the spray shooting far higher than the low freeboard. For three hours we wound our ear-splitting way up this silt-laden, fast flowing, wide river, past mile after mile of thick, steep-sided jungle reaching out to us from both shores. Every now and then we would pull in skillfully to the bank to drop off or pick up people and supplies. We pass very few signs of "civilisation"... just the occasional hut, usually tilting ominously toward the river as gravity and erosion conspire against anything built close to the embankments.

To our delight we see whole troupes of macaques and baboons enjoying their seclusion by the water, apparently undisturbed by our noisy intrusion. We spy hundreds of kingfishers winging in and out of their cavernous nests in the steeper embankments. The entanglement of green is frequently interrupted by splashes of purple or red as flowers compete spectacularly to attract the appropriate pollinators. Butterflies abound. Unfortunately our ears are prevented from hearing the sounds of the jungle by the din of the motor as we speed by. Only occasionally would the all-concealing canopy of trees be broken by a recent fire, timber cutting, or banana or rubber plantations. We would speed by several locals in their slim, low dug-out canoes, being propelled somewhat more sedately by paddle.

At two o'clock we arrive at Dabong where we scramble ashore over a raft of floating bamboo poles. Compared to the deftness of the locals we accomplished this feat with considerable clumsiness. Fortunately we were saved the embarrassment of being the laughing stock by the pig's exit from

the boat which was, to say the least, vastly less skilful than our own! Following the very steep climb up the river bank (where all dwellings have to be located due to the enormous seasonal floods) we find ourselves surrounded by dozens of curious, bulging pairs of brown eyes as we catch our breath, stretch our legs and survey this beautiful little Malay village. It basically consists of a couple of acres, cleared from the ever encroaching jungle, hugging the river. There is a small railway station and a police station. Surrounding the police station is a very high, very scary double barbed wire fence! We soon found an English speaking teacher who kindly aided us in our attempts to find somewhere to stay, but without success. So off we go to the well-barricaded police station. Boy, did we get help there!

We were immediately invited to the house of two young policemen, Leow and Oman. The latter is a constable stationed at Dabong. Leow is the Chief Inspector (Special Branch) for the whole state. He is on one of his many official visits. He spoke faultless English and proved to be a fascinating source of information as well as an intelligent conversationalist. They fed us, gave us drinks and "entertained" us for the rest of the afternoon. On Leow's advice we intend to go to Gua Musang by this evening's train (the only way to get there!) from whence we can, with the aid of the Police Chief (to whom he gave us an introductory letter) view the "ultimate interior" of Malaysia! And maybe meet the original, untouched, unaided and unsettled (and so far elusive!) Orang Asli. We became very excited at this prospect and we are overwhelmed at the generosity of these people.

We learn more... This whole area contains several highly fortified police and/or military posts as precaution against strongly anticipated Communist attack from over the border. We must remain friendly with the police since permits are required to enter most of the areas we wish to go. They tell us this is because of the military manoeuvres in the area. They appear paranoid about the possibility of imminent attack!

At five o'clock Leow's train takes him northwards, followed an hour later by our departure southwards. In the gathering darkness we view the banana and rubber plantations from the grimy, glassless windows of our rickety third class carriage. The mountains loom large and dark in the blackness, providing the perfect backdrop for the flickering bioluminescence of countless fireflies. Much of the forest appears untouched, scarred only by the railway line and the occasional logging operation.

Two hours later, rattled and tired, we arrive at the small, isolated "gateway to the interior" - Gua Musang. This is a bustling frontier town, full of raucous miners dodging jeeps being driven with more speed than purpose up and down the dusty main street. Most loggers appear to be Chinese. Many are single and young - the money is good. There are no pubs, and no alcohol, so we're told. This is definitely not Australia, then! We check into the first of the

two hotels (we're too buggered to even bother comparing prices) and then go searching for our Police Chief, Nick. He is not hard to find. You couldn't help but notice the tall, double barbed wire walls enclosing the Police Station. This is a para-military installation, partly deserted because of the aforementioned manoeuvres. Nick and his mates bend over backwards to help us with volumes of food and advice. He promises to take us "personally" in his jeep to meet the "aborigines" tomorrow. Leow's letter was unbelievably flattering, asking that every courtesy be shown to us... and it certainly was! What kind and generous people these are. Nick shouted us dinner at a restaurant where it seemed he knew everyone by name, and arranged to pick us up at 10 tomorrow. Hardly able to wait until tomorrow, we parted at about 11:30, we to our noisy, thin-walled hotel, he behind the safety of his electrified fence. Let's hope there's no Communist invasion tonight!

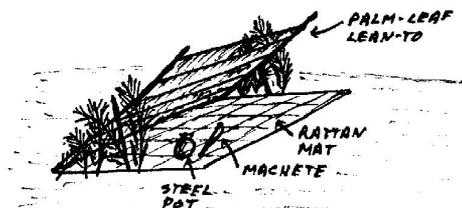
### **Day 75: Wed 28/5/75**

Well, if yesterday was great, today was stupendous! As promised, Nick turned up at 10 o'clock - with driver and interpreter, no less. We were tired from a restless night trying to ignore our neighbours who played a noisy game of cards until 4am! Excitedly we climbed aboard the Police Land Rover, armed with tobacco and coins - gifts for the aborigines. After a couple of delays, where Nick appeared to be involved in some mysterious but important looking business, we were on our way. The road into the jungle is, of course, little more than a walking track but the 4 wheel drive handled it with surprising, if somewhat uncomfortable, ease. Yesterday it didn't rain - unusual in these parts - so the track was in reasonable condition. In the wet it is impassable. Even so we got bogged once, to be hauled out ungraciously by a nearby bulldozer. Our path was blocked twice by fallen trees in the 10 miles. Each time a dozer quickly came to our aid. What it is to travel with the Police Chief! On the way we stop at a 700 year old Chinese settlement where the few inhabitants survive through subsistence farming (mainly rice, bananas and rubber). They also breed goldfish, not to eat but as a hobby. Most unusual!

We eventually reach the end of the road. Here there is an aboriginal camp but it is abandoned. Nick tells us this is usually because of floods or because one of them has died. They always depart a place of death, leaving the body strung up in a tree, returning frequently until the body rots, to give it water! Of course we are disappointed but half expected it because these people are semi-nomadic, their only crop being tapioca. The rest of their food they obtain directly from the jungle. We spend some time examining the area and then reluctantly start to head for home when Nick spots a native nearby. Through the interpreter we learn of the new location of the tribe. It is not far! We head off on foot. Fifteen minutes later we find ourselves in a small clearing barely scratched out of the jungle. We are soon surrounded by about 30 silent, staring, filthy, fuzzy-haired, dark-skinned natives, each dressed only in a tiny loin cloth and a thick layer of baked on mud. Their "village" consisted of 6 or 7 crudely built "humpies", sprawled across the face of a small hill. The gift of tobacco was appreciated by their leader, but no smile adorned his face - or any of their faces, for that matter. And they spoke even less than they smiled!

Through the interpreter we slowly learned that they had been forced from their other site six months ago, not by death but by floods. We spent some time examining their meagre belongings, their food (mainly vegetarian) and their very basic cooking methods. Most of the men were out hunting (deer, pigs, bats, birds) with blowpipes and machetes their only weapons. We learnt, also, that these people don't sing, dance or make music of any sort. I find this hard to believe, though. If true, it definitely makes them a minority amongst minorities! The only crop they grow is a small quantity of tapioca that they plant in natural clearings... they only clear land for their dwellings, not for

growing crops. For all their harsh living conditions they seemed to be remarkably healthy and free from sores.



With so little to "do" all day long, and with apparently so little in the way of "entertainment" they seemed very "lost" with mystified expressions on their dirty faces. This is the only tribe in Malaysia that has refused Government aid or assistance in stubborn preference to their old way of life. But even so, some modern concessions are being made... for example, the weekly trip into town for bartering.

When I see the advance of the greed-driven timber getters, I wonder at the fate of these harmless, innocent, bewildered people. After a couple of enlightening hours spent in their company we rattled our way back to town where we were given a hearty Malay-style (ie, fingers!) lunch of rice, curry, fish, meat, vegies, etc. The police were so generous yet so apologetic about the food, explaining repeatedly that they were "only" bachelors. We then visited the only clinic in town - a dirty excuse for a medical centre yet it provides free aid for the sick or injured until they can be moved to the nearest hospital at K. Krai. The 5 staff members, Nick and ourselves then all went swimming in the nearby river. Everyone just knocks off work at the slightest excuse. "No worries", they say. Not that they appear to do much anyway. I've heard a lot of complaints about "hard work" but have seen very little of it! Their values and ideas concerning work seem so different to ours, but somehow I think that the pressure of the modern world will soon transform their happy-go-lucky attitudes. It will be through necessity, though, not through desire!

The swim provided another example of Islamic prudery. The girls didn't go in at all, the men were fully clothed. Brigitte had to wear her skirt while I got away with wearing only my shorts. Everyone stared at us in amazement! We had to get fully dressed for the ride back into town too! Such a simple thing as a swim here takes hours of slap-happy organisation and preparation. The swim itself almost seemed to be of secondary importance. Time is something that is considered least of all!

Back to the Station for another fantastic meal, games of chess and cards and conversation to while away the hours then we turn in on the floor of the Police Station - provided, of course, with loads of comfy cushions. Naturally all of this was offered free of charge! What a superb day this has been.

PS. To see a skilled timber cutter wielding his huge chain saw as if it were a simple toy was a sight (and sound) to behold. It puts my feeble efforts at tree felling to shame.

### **Day 76: Thu 29/5/75**

Behind this little town is the reason for its name... Gua (cave) Musang (fox). There rises directly above the railway station a sheer, huge monolith of limestone, riddled with caves which are reportedly the homes for several hundred foxes. It looks so impressive so close to town, a sheer 300 metre cliff of white, grey and green. So, what do two adventurous young people with nothing else to do on a sunny May morning decide to do? Of course - climb to the top! We heard that there is a way and ask for directions. One guy, who speaks no English decides that the best way is to take us there himself, so he instantly downs tools and sets off skywards at a cracking pace with us in tow. Up, up we go. The climb is very steep. Over constantly wet, slippery mud. Over equally slippery limestone ledges, with fiercely jagged ridges just waiting for their chance to catch the unwary. Through claustrophobic, narrow crevices that force you to wiggle through sideways. Under dripping rock ceilings, sliding on our stomachs. Scrambling up sheer rock faces with vines our only lifelines. Through enormous ancient caverns, some full of birds, others with bats, still others sporting the tell-tale tracks of foxes. An hour of exhausting climbing, crawling, slipping and scratching our way, often in pitch blackness, lit only by a feeble, faltering torch, we find ourselves at the summit. We are dripping with perspiration, some of which, I must confess, owes its origin more to fear than exertion! The view is spectacular. So much so that our guide, who remained speechless during the ascent, now shows great concern that we have no camera. The little town looks so fragile and toy-like, while the trains, with their long loads of logs in tow, look like they were lovingly assembled by a perfectionist modeler.

We can see the extent of the destruction caused by the logging from here. Man's intrusion into the jungle is easy to spot. Wherever he goes he attempts to "improve" on Nature, usually by simplifying the ecosystems. Nature, however, is not simple so the result is often irreversible destruction. There appears to be little or no replanting of the trees so irreverently wrenched from their rightful places. So the valuable, and relatively thin, topsoil quickly finds itself in the nearest stream, to eventually settle uselessly on the ocean floor.

Our guide, disgusted at our lack of camera, soon got tired of waiting for us so he left us to find our own circuitous, unhurried route back down. We took great pleasure in quietly observing the plant and animal life clinging to this near vertical island of rock. We ventured into several caves in the hope of spying an elusive fox or two. No luck, but we got to see many magnificent limestone formations, glistening with mineral-laden water as they continue their slow transformation of ugly rock into beautiful sculpture. Mostly we enjoyed having the peace and quiet of the mountain to ourselves.

Back on Mother Earth we decide it is time to move on again, so we pack, say our fond farewells and catch the 3:15 to K. Krai. The daylight journey reveals large stretches of "forest reserve" where the timber getters and rubber growers are forbidden to take their greedy land-destroying machines. So thick and wild and beautiful is this country that I wish that Man had not entered any of it. If only he would learn to live with the rest of Nature and not try to fight it. I live in hope that he will see the error of his ways before it is too late.

Sunset, and the train arrives at K. Krai. We check into our hotel and are preparing to sleep when a smiling Leow arrives at our door, insisting that we join him and his friends for dinner and a "chit-chat". It is 1:30am before we eventually leave their amiable and generous company. They all speak such good English and are all so well educated. We talk of everything from Vietnam and Communism to Australian aborigines. We learn much about the Malay people. We discuss similarities and differences in different cultures and countries. We discuss the characteristics of the "Asian mentality" and differences in values. We share jokes and stories, and laugh and sing for hours, all the while being fed at their expense. They find it difficult that THIS particular Australian doesn't drink beer! We meet the local "heavies"... the police chief, the mayor, teachers, bankers, a sociologist... all more than willing to smother us with their never-tiring hospitality. They arrange for us to stay longer than our anticipated one night so with happy hearts and heavy eyes we eventually collapse into bed wondering what they have in store for us tomorrow. Once out of the cities the people are just so friendly it's hard to believe. We have no qualms about extending our stay in this wonderful, warm-hearted place. Many of them have expressed jealousy at our "privileged" white skin and "English" education. I'm beginning to feel that I am a very lucky person to be what, who and where I am!

### **Day 77: Fri 30/5/75**

Friday is the day of "rest" for this Islamic state so everything is closed. We are waiting for a friend of Leow's to take us to his plantation tomorrow so we can inspect the production process. So we didn't expect much to happen today - it was to be a day of rest for us as well. Leow comes to get us at 9 o'clock, takes us to breakfast and introduces us to more of his influential friends. They all seem so interested in us. I guess it's because they get so few tourists in this part of the world. We sit, eat, drink and talk for another hour or so. The extent of our conversation topics seems limitless. They are just as keen to learn from us as we are from them. It is fascinating to see Australia through their eyes... to them it sounds like heaven on Earth!

Leow then lends us his motorbike and we take the opportunity to inspect more of the district. Off we zoom, through quaint Malay villages, along the winding river bank, through numerous rubber plantations which make up most of the countryside! We return to the hotel and prepare for a writing, reading, sketching sort of afternoon when we are invited to join the local schoolteacher (a Seikh), banker (Chinese), magistrate (Malay) and two Chinese businessmen for further talk and food. Of course we accept, never knocking back the opportunity for a free feed! Thus we spend several more friendly, over-indulgent, interesting hours in the pleasant company of these information-starved people. We are invited to stay the night at the teacher's house so, needless to say, we check out of the hotel and move in to his "humble abode", about a mile and a half out of town. He drives us there, making a few sightseeing detours on the way.



When we arrive, we begin our aforementioned pre-planned afternoon. A sketch or two, a little writing, and a pleasant, leisurely stroll along the high river bank. An enjoyable way to while away a hot afternoon. Singh (the Seikh) found us lolling under a tree and drove us back to his house where we delighted in yet more conversation and a delicious "home-cooked" Hindustani meal. Like many other Seikhs we have met, Singh is so proud,

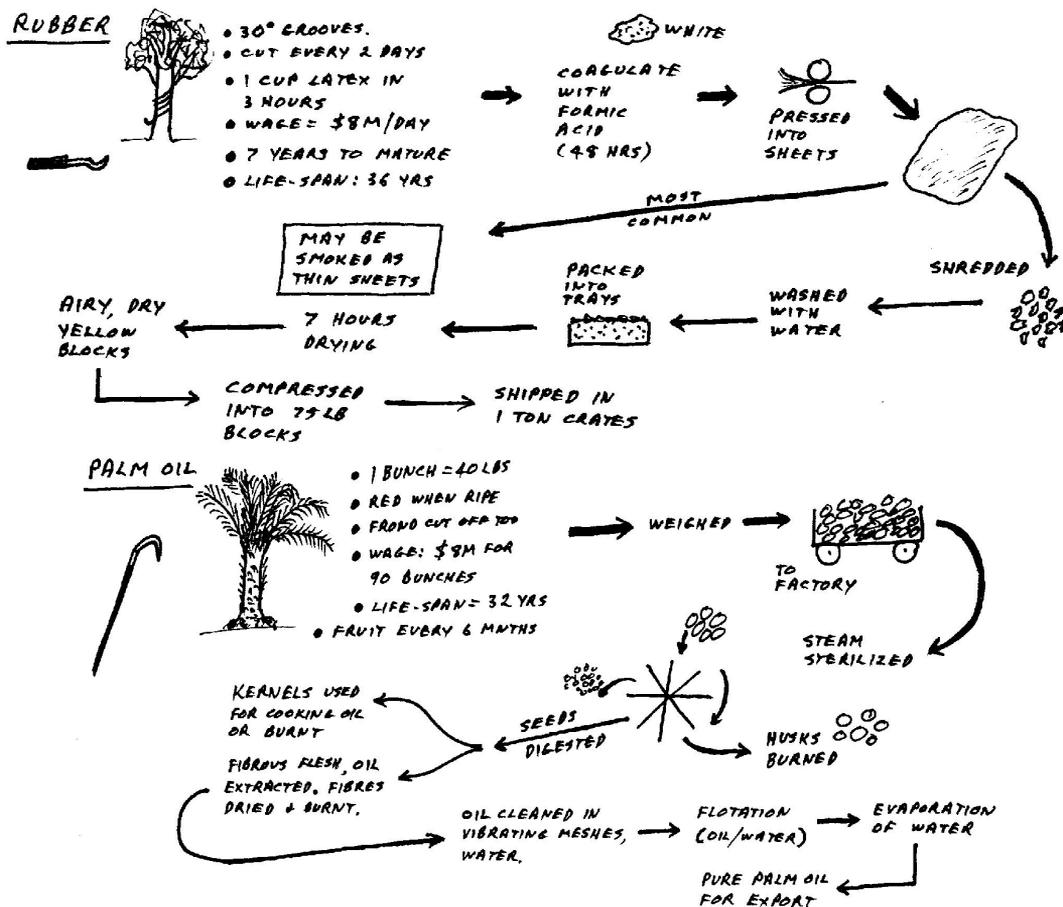
self-confident and arrogantly overbearing that he is almost intolerable. I have never met a man so full of himself, to the total exclusion of all others. Yet, as always, a potentially disagreeable circumstance was made fruitful as I discovered a helluva lot about his religion, Seikdom. We learnt of the 5 K's (knife, bangle, long hair, underclothes and neat turbanned hair). We learnt of the marriage ceremony, their beliefs, their culture, their history, etc. We also talked for some time about teaching. I was very critical of his "hit-or-be-hit" system of control and his overemphasis on drill as a method of instruction. He had not even heard of some of the more modern psychologists or their ideas and couldn't understand my methods at all. His class size (40-50) and teaching load would not be tolerated in Australia.

After dinner two Seikh friends of his came over and we talked more. I am learning so much. Though I have never met her, I feel sorry for his wife. She knew him a mere 20 minutes before they married! She has been "banished" to KL while she gives birth to their second child - the first, horror of horrors, was a girl! She has left behind a sexually frustrated, dirty old man. We spent much of the night playing, of all things, Monopoly. Although I think our host saw it more as an opportunity to seduce Brigitte. He was, of course, unsuccessful in this pursuit - Brigitte found him totally repulsive. It took until midnight for Singh to realise Brigitte's lack of interest, when we bedded down on the floor while Singh and one of his mates took the bed, his immense pride somewhat wounded.

If nothing else, an interesting, informative day.

## Day 78: Sat 31/5/75

Floor or no floor. Ants or no ants. Last night was a good sleep. Singh had to go to KB so he dropped us in town early where we ate our usual breakfast of Roti and Milo. After half an hour's wait, Chew (one of Singh's friends) picked us up in his air conditioned Kingswood (what else?). He shouted us another breakfast ("No, we haven't eaten yet!!") then drove us to his estate/plantation where he is the General Manager for a large British company. There we were joined by the local manager, John, a well-educated Indian Christian. The four of us then proceeded on a grand tour of the estate. We spent a good 4 hours examining every process involved in the production of palm oil and rubber, having a great deal of fun as we did so. The following diagram summarises both processes...



All this, and much, much more, we learnt first hand. There wasn't an operation that we didn't see, smell and touch personally! They were all so helpful, never refusing to go out of their way for us.

Our curiosities satisfied for the time being we return to town for yet another free meal and more fond farewells. We sit quietly in the shade catching up on our writing, waiting for a lift from Chew and John into KB this evening. We

depart in the middle of a thunderous tropical rainstorm and after a really hairy ride we arrive in KB where we wash, pack, sleep and generally prepare ourselves for our invasion of Thailand on the morrow...

PS. Both the palm and the rubber trees are not indigenous. They were imported from Africa and South America respectively.

## Thailand

### **Day 79: Sun 1/6/75**

A big hassle getting out of KB - We didn't realise that there was a half hour time difference between here and Thailand! But eventually a speedy, dusty ride in a speedy, dusty diesel Mercedes taxi gets us to Rantau Panjung where our customs and immigration formalities are seen to. After an easy hitch-hike into Golok, and an equally easy path through the Thai red tape, we board the 10:20 train for Ban Hat Yai. The train was dirty but efficient, departing and arriving right on time.

The southern Thai people are noticeably different from the Malays. Only slightly so in the way they look, but mainly in their attitudes towards us... they seem to be either apathetic or downright rude. Some just ignore our presence entirely, preferring to look straight through us! Brigitte says that most of the people in the country areas of Thailand are like this, but I'll reserve judgment until I've met more of them. So far, Thailand seems very different from Malaysia. Very few speak or understand English and the Thai language is so tonal with very strange (to our ears) phonemes and pronunciation that even if you could read it, (which you can't) you would have great difficulty in making yourself understood! To make matters even more confusing, the only concession they make to foreign travelers is to use Arabic numerals on the occasional signpost. Sometimes! Only rarely do you see Arabic letters - and when you do, the more-or-less phonetic spelling varies enormously from place to place. Thai currency appears to be an unfathomable mystery, also. Nevertheless, we bungle our way onwards.

No doubt about it, we are definitely in a Buddhist country now. We learn, often by trial and error, some of the unusual customs that accompany the Thai version of this widespread religion-come-philosophy. Such as:

The head is sacred, the feet lowly, so never point a foot at a Thai. It is as insulting as touching a Thai on the head. Definitely taboo! To tread on a coin, which carries an image of the king's head, is a serious crime. We are told that quite recently people who have done just this - even by accident - have been executed on the spot!

All men at some time in their life before they marry must become a Monk. You see many of them in their orange robes, shaved heads and all. This episode in their lives is to teach them humility as they go from door to door, begging for food. Monks can travel anywhere for free. They appear to be highly respected. A man can do this up to 7 times in his lifetime. To an outsider this seems an easy life since there is no compulsion to do anything if that's what he wants. For a woman to touch a monk, even by accident, results

in him having to do considerable penance. You would think that this would be difficult to avoid in the crowded streets, but they seem to manage!

Some things remind me of Bali. In front of many houses are small ornate shrines with incense and flowers, etc... Who said Buddhism wasn't a "religion"? The temples are incredible... large tri-roofed structures of orange, red, gold and yellow - warm, vibrant colours. Each temple contains at least one effigy of Buddha in every conceivable position.

We arrive at Hat Yai in the late afternoon. The town reminds me of Indonesia with its noise, its dirt and its bustle. However, I note some differences, especially in the people. Far from being smiling, friendly and helpful, they are often arrogant, rude, annoyingly persistent and they seem to be out to "get you" at every opportunity. So far I've seen no reason to trust them as I would a Malay or Indonesian. (Wow, talk about sweeping generalisations, but these are first impressions. I'd be happy to change my perceptions later!). The town itself has that typical Asian feel to it... the markets, the stalls, the noisy bemos and motorbikes, the cheap hotels (into one of which we go to stay the night), the pervasive smells and, of course, the beggars. This part of Thailand is very noticeably poorer than Malaysia. The houses are in a very dilapidated condition, especially those in the country areas. There are a large number of beggars, mainly children, old men and women. Some of them have horrible deformities. Like those several poor souls lacking any arms OR legs! Or those others with various stages of leprosy. Many push themselves, or are pushed by young boys, around on small rickety trolleys. Some are just too old and alone to live any other way. They crawl through the gutters competing with the hordes of rats and wild cats for the putrid morsels of discarded food. I cried in helplessness at these pitiful sights...

For us, of course, the food was good and cheap, so with unavoidable guilt in our hearts we ate well and retired to our noisy, brightly lit hotel for a night of restless semi-sleep. We have discovered that most Chinese hotels are very noisy. And with the walls only running three quarters of the way to the ceiling, they are also quite light - they keep their lights on all night! This hotel, however, seemed worse than most. We will definitely NOT be recommending it to Frommer!

## **Day 80: Mon 2/6/75**

Up at 6, we board the 7:30 bus to Phuket. The Thais love to show off, and their buses are good examples of this aspect of their nature. Our bus was a huge Mercedes, seating SIX abreast. It was covered in gleaming stainless steel, chrome and bright orange, blue, red, gold and yellow paint. Inside and out it was festooned with garlands of flowers, streamers, flags, with chrome air horns on the roof. It appeared that every screw head was similarly chromed. The driver's cabin looked more like a temple, with framed pictures, burning incense and numerous icons. To our conservative Western eyes this all looked so kitsch. But this bus was not alone in its ornateness... each bus, bemo, truck, bike and car seemed to be in some bizarre contest to see who could be the most conspicuous. To increase this exposure to the public gaze, they seemed intent on drawing attention to themselves by all driving like maniacs! The death-wish seems much more developed here than in the Balinese bemo driver. And that's saying something!

Our driver was good, but very fast... Have you ever heard a bus's tyres screech as it rounds corners at three times the speed which any sane person would consider safe? Well our bus did this consistently! Even so, the trip still took eight solid, bum-aching hours. But, unexpectedly, the scenery on the way was breathtaking as the flat, monotonous plains (with their requisite rubber and rice) gave way to spectacular, mist-clad mountain ranges with deep, moist valleys and sheer cave-riddled limestone cliffs. With every possible niche literally smothered in lush, green tropical vegetation. Just like the mountain at Gua Musang, only repeated hundreds of times!

The road was the most tortuous, treacherous, windy stretch of bitumen I've ever been on. At times the passengers would utter a collective gasp as we'd slide sideways towards a dark green abyss... only to heave an equally collective sigh of relief to discover us still upright and hurtling forwards once more towards the next hairpin bend. Once over the mountains we pass several small towns on the undulating plains, stopping at some for meal breaks and to resettle our jangled nerves. Poverty here is quite extensive. Comparing this area of Thailand with Malaysia is like comparing a slum with a palace. And what's worse, the people appear to be extremely unhappy in their poverty... it is rare indeed to witness spontaneous smiles as in Bali.

Late afternoon and we arrive at the west coast island town of Phuket. We had planned to sleep on the beach, but since the heavens give every indication of imminent opening, we check into a cheap hotel instead. We spend the rest of the evening and night acquainting ourselves with this bustling town... Busy, noisy, dirty: three words that apply to most of the places seen so far in Thailand. There is scant attention paid to cleanliness - cockroaches outnumber the rats which just outnumber the cats which in turn

seem to outnumber the people. As in most parts of Asia, the sewers are open, adding their distinctive aroma to the atmosphere. I had hoped to revise my opinion of Thai people as I encountered more of them, but I'm afraid I can't do so yet. They will only grudgingly give you assistance if you persist in demanding it. The young males in particular are downright discourteous and unfriendly. Knowing how difficult it is for foreigners to master their language, they will make fun of you, cracking jokes that encourage loud cries of supercilious jeering from their mates. Phukett seems to have little to offer us, the impoverished markets even close at night! The town is sprawling, old and unplanned, providing nowhere that we can go to escape the incredible din of the traffic. We plan our exit to some peace and quiet tomorrow...

### **Day 81: Tue 3/6/75**

Boy, did it rain! All night and most of the morning it bucketed down. However, a tinge of blue in the sky promises fairer weather, so we board a bus to Patong beach, about 15 miles out of town. The "bus" was really a converted flat-top truck, many years, miles and coats of gaudy paint old. The eight cent trip took two hours! These people seem to have no word for "hurry" in their vocabulary. They appear not to have any concept of the importance of time. After a bone-rattling, mind-numbing journey up, through and down the slippery, muddy, pot-holed mountain roads; after innumerable stops, detours, reversings and back-trackings in village after village; after passing scenery the like of which would be hard to find anywhere (so green, so varied, so exciting) we eventually arrived at the beautiful, QUIET, picturesque and relatively unpopulated beach of Patong. And here we have, at last, real (though terrible) SURF! With waves originating in the Indian Ocean, no less! We enjoy having the beach to ourselves... well, almost. We share it occasionally with a handful of fishermen who certainly don't fit the "unfriendly" mould of other Thais. They don't hesitate in giving us shells, an angel fish in a bottle, and quite a few friendly smiles.

The day couldn't make up its mind - we watched the rains approach from sea. The first squall passed within a mile of us, providing us with a spectacular display as it soaked the nearby mountainous headland while we remained bone dry. Rain or no rain, it remained stifling hot, leading us to punctuate our beachcombing with short, refreshing swims in the strong, cool currents. We pass the time mainly sitting or walking along the sands, reveling in the peace and simplicity after the hassles of travel. We observe crabs busily digging their nightly homes in the sand. We spy a school of dolphins grinning their way southwards, close to shore. We watch the fishermen skillfully casting for shore fish, of which there appears to be an abundance. We sit beneath a shady tree, reading and playing the mouth organ, recharging our drained batteries. This is just the kind of day you need now and then.

I spent some of this time observing the behaviour of a herd of that most magnificent creature, the water buffalo. At the slightest sign of danger, the young calves would collect together and lie down in the centre of a semi-circle formed by the large bulls, each facing outwards, brandishing their enormous horns. Such a defensive stance reminded me of that of the Arctic Bison. In fact, the water buffalo looks somewhat like a hairless Arctic Bison. If the Balinese couldn't exist without their bamboo and coconut palms, neither could a "mainlander" exist without his water buffalo!

With the approach of night, and the threat of more rain squalls, we share a taxi (with eight others and a baby!) back to town. There, amidst the noise, we enjoy the tantalising tastes of Thai cooking and fruits (I'm now definitely

addicted to mangos!). Another wander around this relatively unexciting town encourages us to arrange for a departure to Bangkok early tomorrow.

PS. Needless to say, that ubiquitous rubber tree exists here as well, but not on such huge plantations as in Malaysia. Thailand's main produce is, of course, rice. Followed closely, and somewhat disturbingly, by that other source of income generation, especially in Bangkok, prostitution.

## **Day 82: Wed 3/6/75**

A very long day, this one. We depart Phuket on the dot of nine o'clock in a bus not unlike the gaudy one in which we arrived. This driver, however, was somewhat more sane, thank god. The numbing of my mind caused by the SIXTEEN AND A HALF HOUR journey to Bangkok tends to confuse the order of the day's events so I'll forego the conventional chronological presentation in favour of a less precise record of the day's impressions:

- \* The spectacular countryside - golden, wind-swept beaches, their many moods revealed by an impressive array of different weather patterns... everything from brilliant sunshine to a black tropical downpour. We follow the rugged coastline for a hundred miles or so, hugging the base of the massive, jagged mountains permanently shrouded in a mist which saturates the foliage, making the greenness greener still. Occasionally a vertical slit of crystalline white would appear against the darkness as foaming waters would plunge down the perilous cliffs in a spectacular display of beauty.
- \* Then there are the rice paddies! Quite unlike the stepped, contoured beauty of a Balinese rice paddy, these are found only on the plains, their monotony only broken by small clumps of ferns and palms, giving the impression of a moving, undulating, green sea, dotted with even greener islands. An impressive sight.
- \* And then there is the jungle. Untouched, encroaching on the road wherever it has a chance. I'm intoxicated by the smell of jungle... The misty, warm, dark, rain-soaked plants and soil produce a seductive, distinctive aroma all its own.
- \* The road. In the north, straight, fast and well made. In the mountains, tortuous, slow and in need of constant maintenance as the forces of nature persistently attempt to reclaim what is rightfully theirs. These mountain roads, of course, are far more interesting!
- \* At night, the millions of fireflies seem intent on making a mockery of Man's feeble roadside incandescence.
- \* The buffalo. Everywhere work is to be done. Great herds roam free in the rice fields, smiling contentedly at the rain!
- \* Elephants! Yes, we actually saw them! Some were bathing in the muddy rivers. Others pulling huge carts. Yet others effortlessly nudging giant logs towards ancient suspensionless lorries. Others were happy just to enjoy the mud! Huge, placid beasts, having unquestioning faith in their masters. A thrilling sight!

\*The incredible amount of uninhabited land. My ignorant impression of Asia was of a land of teeming millions standing shoulder to shoulder, unable to move. Not so in Bali. Not so in Java, Singapore, Malaysia. Not so in Thailand. Sure, Man's presence is everywhere to be felt but he is not yet everywhere personally present!

\*The town of Chum Phon. Impressed me as a friendly, quiet, peaceful little town. But still dirty. And cheap? I still cannot understand how such a seemingly arbitrary decision as "one \$A = 27 Baht" can be made to give ME such an enormous economic advantage over a worker in his own country. Somewhere in the formula for working all this out, the element of fairness and personal worth was left out!

\* The Isthmus of Kra, the southern Burmese border, the Andaman sea, the Gulf of Siam. We see these exotic names on our map and look out of the window and there they are! What a wonderful feeling. Even the River Kwai passes beneath us, looking just like any other river, but like so many in Asia, with its own gruesome stories to tell.

\* There is an abundance of military trucks, ships and planes, indicating that ever-present fear of Communist insurgency. Thailand is now all but surrounded by the feared Communists.

\* I have now met many good, friendly, helpful Thais, but still there persists that infuriating undercurrent of animosity.

\* Sixteen hours in a bus is not an experience I'd be happy to repeat. We arrived in Bangkok at 1:30am. Also an experience I'd care not to repeat! We had difficulty hailing a taxi, and when we did get one, we had difficulty finding an open hotel. We actually wandered the streets searching for one that was both open and had vacancies. Eventually, however, we crashed to sleep in a very dirty but cheap hotel with a Thai name that I couldn't even read, let alone pronounce!

\*Approaching Bangkok, seen through very bleary eyes, was just like driving into Sydney at night. The lights, the streets, the buildings in the city proper, are similar to any Western style city. I'll reserve my first impressions, however, until my brain is firing on all cylinders!

### **Day 83: Thu 4/6/75**

For a people so steeped in the meditative philosophy of Buddhism to build such a raucous, chaotic city as Bangkok will remain one of the unsolved mysteries of all time! We awoke at seven, whether we wanted to or not... the noise outside was almost deafening. It seems like every second vehicle is a two-stroke bike or bemo (here they're called tuk-tuks), sporting either an expansion pipe or no muffler at all, roaring down streets in seeming oblivion to the rights or wishes of anyone else. There must be some sort of competition they're running for the noisiest or fastest vehicle in Bangkok. Otherwise, I'm lost for an explanation! With our ears becoming numb with the constant assault, we head for the Post Office where, joy of joys, I get THREE letters from Glenny. Brigitte gets her long-awaited letter announcing that HE is in town and she wastes no time, departing on the Cloud Nine bus to meet HIM. Such is the way of "traveling friendships". So rapidly formed, and so easily dissolved.

I decide to combine "business" with a "getting acquainted" sort of day... all alone in this big, noisy, busy, dirty city. I head in the general direction of the Vieng Thai hotel, where I hear they sell very cheap airline tickets. I wander through China town, past huge, extravagant, beautifully ornate temples; over canals so filthy that to call them sewers would be generously euphemistic! I seek temporary relief from the traffic in a most beautiful temple (Wat Sraket). Here the city's noise all but dissolves into nothingness, replaced only by the gentle wind-generated jingle-jangle of tiny brass bells. Up to now I haven't had the opportunity to read Glenny's letters but here is the perfect location. Boy, I'm missing her. I pore over every word of her letters, even the bits she accuses of being "trivial".

The peace of my musings and meditations was soon interrupted by a long, informative chat with one of the young monks in the temple. He was as keen to learn of life in Australia as I was to learn of Buddhism and Thailand. In spite of a significant language barrier, we managed to communicate quite well. What a cultural "binder" Buddhism is. It helps explain the collective pride Thais have in their language, their culture and their religion. Unfortunately this pride spills over into their personalities and I get the feeling that the requirement for each man to become a monk before marriage achieves NOT the humility they seek. I feel that they seem to get instead a sense of sacrifice that, when acknowledged by his peers, gives him an air of superiority. Many monks appear to be smugly satisfied in this superiority.

Anyway, I learnt a lot and was allowed to witness a dozen or so monks at prayer in the huge and ornate main room, surrounded by Buddha icons. In such an atmosphere as this it was easy to lose my sense of time and place. The crazy reality of Bangkok disappeared behind the fixed expression on

Buddha's serene face, reflecting the apparent "timelessness" of this religion. Within half an hour, they finished their prayers, I bid my farewells and continued on my way. Past monuments and statues. Past innumerable temples, any one of which could quite rightly be described as spectacular. A whole city full of temples seems to generate a familiarity that doesn't do justice to their individual beauty.

Eventually I manage to purchase an air ticket home (not long now!) and continue my attempt at wearing out more thong rubber... Through the markets, along the putrid river (seemingly carrying more shit than water), past yet more temples and monuments (you have to pay at the main gates, but the side gates are often open!), through shops so crammed with stuff that they overflow onto the pavement and onto the street. I amuse myself by catching a bus, not having the faintest clue where it is going to, and getting off whenever the mood strikes me. I then just walk around, absorbing the atmosphere before catching another bus. Sore and tired, I make my way back to the hotel where I write letters, diary and do a little reading. Brigitte and her fiance, Marco, call in to say goodbye. We grab a bite to eat out in the street, swap addresses and both Brigitte and I confess to feeling more than a little sad at the inevitable loss of a friendship. We suspect we'll never see one another again, but at least we got to spend a couple of great weeks together. Ah, well, such is the life of a traveler!

A quick, lonely, aimless walk around the back streets of Bangkok (a bit scary!), a further sampling of Thai food (boy, it's hot!), then home to bed, where despite the racket outside I just know I'll sleep soundly.

Anything goes in this city. You can buy anything you like, from false ID cards to any sort of sexual preference. Flaunting the law, however, seems to reach its peak on the streets where the cars openly ignore the frantic attempts at control by red-faced, whistle-blowing police. They merely continue on their reckless, noisy way, unhindered by any law or law enforcement. The resulting chaos appears to be unremarkable in the eyes of the Bangkokians, but it would be intolerable in any Australian city. Bangkok (the "city of angels"!) reminds me of a woman who has rapidly lost her childlike innocence and naiveté to become more "sophisticated". Such sophistication, however, seems somewhat superficial. Give me the simplicity of Bali any day!

I've decided to head north tomorrow since I'll soon have another chance to see more of Bangkok for the three days before I fly home - a requirement of the ticket!

### **Day 84: Fri 6/6/75**

Through the early morning rush, crowds, chaos and horn-honking din of peak hour Bangkok, I bus my way to the Northern Bus Terminal where I wait for the next bus to Chiang Mai. I fill the hour and a half wait with writing, reading, talking to a Swiss couple, and generally observing the hectic lives of the people around me. At 10:30 we depart. For most of the eight and a half hour trip the road was flat and straight, surrounded on both sides for as far as the eye could see by flooded fields of, you guessed it, RICE. It's amazing how so much land has been cleared to grow this single crop. Once, for a short time only, did we cross some hill country, where the timber-getters were hard at work destroying what little countryside that was left untouched by the rice farmers. Even on this section of road most of the hills were distant. How monotonous is this environment compared with the south. No wonder Central Thailand is described as the rice bowl of Southeast Asia. Such productivity, of course, makes Thailand an enviable target for the less fortunate Communist countries surrounding her... a fact not lost on Thailand's Military, with evidence of their paranoid activities everywhere.

Our bus made very good time, stopping only twice... once for 20 minutes for lunch, and once at sunset for a strange little ritual, apparently designed to seek the gods' assistance for a safe journey. We stopped without warning. Full of purpose, the conductor leaps off the bus, mounts a few steps to a small, brightly painted hut, buys a handful of firecrackers from an old man in the stall next door, mutters a few prayers to the small shrine, then, turning to the bus he lights the firecrackers one by one from the smoking incense sticks, throwing them to explode on a pile of the remains of hundreds of similar little ceremonies. Then, without any further ado he leaps back on board the bus and we zoom off into the distance, confident in the knowledge that the now-appeased spirits will kindly look after us!

The 500 mile journey eventually brings us to the sleepy little (pop. 850,000) hill city of Chiang Mai, Thailand's northern gateway. It is 7pm and I'm tired and dirty so I check into a beaut little "guest house", reminiscent of Indonesia's losmens, and after a much needed wash, turn in for the night. It is so quiet here compared to Bangkok, and the air is so deliciously clean. From my window I can see the surrounding mountains looming dark against the darkening sky. Near the summit of one of these mountains I can see a grouping of twinkling lights. Apparently those lights betray the location of Wat Doi Sutep, the highest temple in Thailand. Those lights seem to quietly beckon me as I drift off happily to a much needed sleep...

### **Day 85: Sat 7/6/75**

What a great little city this is! Such a relief after the insanity of Bangkok. All those negative comments I've previously made about Thai people don't apply at all here. Here they are friendly, open and very helpful. They also are much more ready to smile - especially the beautiful children. I arose early to make the most of the sunshine and began exploring. First to the tourist office where I am given every possible assistance, then across the moat and through the wall to the old part of the city. Here I reveled in visiting the ancient (14th Century) temples. I also checked out the impressive military base, along with dozens of journalists from all over the world. Like so many circling vultures, they are all waiting for war to break out! I spent quite some time, but very little money, investigating the multitude of fascinating stores, mainly selling locally produced stuff - silk, shawls, woodcarving, umbrellas, cotton goods, lacquerwork... The markets are nothing short of spectacular. They are not hot, not dirty, not even noisy. And the sellers are quite content not to rip you off! Am I still in Asia?

And the food! Sampling the enormous variety is an adventure in itself. I thought my taste buds had at last become acclimatised to the spicy food until I chomped confidently into something that turned out to be stuffed with raw, whole red chillies. Now that's going too far! The old moat, which now doubles as a sewer, even has a few (very hardy) fish in it. The streets are generally clean, and even the traffic seems to flow relatively sanely. Wat Prasingha is the oldest and most venerated temple in the area, built in 1345. The huge bronze Buddha inside has sat there serenely observing the world for all those years. He is surrounded by murals that are some of the best and most well preserved I've seen. Wat Chedi Luang is also very old but is partly destroyed, courtesy of an earthquake or two. The sanctuary, however, was rebuilt and clearly demonstrates the workmanship (and the expense) that goes into building one of these magnificent structures... Gold plated Buddhas are common enough here, but to surround them with mosaics of pure emerald, now that is really something to see! Entering the sanctuary, I feel that I would be committing a mortal sin if I were to even speak softly. I sit quietly, cross-legged on the polished floor, contemplating the expression on Buddha's face, surrounded by numerous statues secreted beneath huge carved wooden beams. Soon the outside world dissolves and I think how easy it would be to accept the life of a Buddhist monk, denouncing all worldly things and living a contemplative, prayerful way of life. Such places are aptly named. They really ARE sanctuaries.

In the afternoon I meet an Australian couple on their way to Europe. As we talk I find myself transposing myself and Glenny into their shoes... traveling alone is a drag. A threesome is OK but a twosome is better. A man and a woman is even better still. If they are in love, it is perfect. This pair had been

in Chiang Mai for a week and were very helpful in telling me what to avoid and what to see. Apparently there are a few tourist rip-offs, especially some of the "tours". So tomorrow I'll hire a bike and do it all myself. I worry that I should be more impressed with all these temples than I am. Maybe I'm suffering from overexposure, like the kid that gets sick of ice cream if given too much. The sheer number of temples in this country is incredible. Each is unique, but they all seem to share a commonality about them. They seem to serve both as houses for Buddha's image, and as hiding places for the oft-oppressed monks.

Evening finds me joined by my two Swiss friends (from the bus, remember?) for a wonderful meal. They fill me with tales about Africa, India, Nepal, Katmandu, etc. I sit entranced, trying to take it all in, for future reference. After a couple of hours chatting I leave my friends to wonder the brightly lit streets. I sit at the top of an ancient staircase leading to an equally ancient mid-city temple, observing the people as they busy themselves in their nightly chores when I am joined by a girl that I last met in Bali! We talk for some time and arrange to go on the bike together tomorrow. I really don't like to travel alone. While there are times when I need to be alone there seem to be more times when I need to share life with others. Believe it or not, this is a momentous discovery for me. I guess that my changing perspectives indicate that I'm still alive! *I live, therefore I change!* Or is that vice-versa?

### **Day 86: Sun 8/6/75**

A very full and enjoyable day. Up early, hassle for a bike, pick up Sue from her hotel and we're off. Through the early morning bustle of an awakening city, we head north. Our first stop is the Mae Sa Falls where, we were later to learn, two bike riders were shot at the previous day! The falls themselves were nothing much, but the setting is just fabulous... a mysterious bamboo forest with emerald green leaves casting their moving, dappled shadows on bald rocks of intriguing shapes. Huge twisted-limbed trees stretching across the gurgling waters. Insects and birds joining the roar of the falls with their strident cacophony of jungle sounds. We want to stay longer in this beautiful spot, but there is much more to see.

Next stop, Chiang Dao Caves. This is a complex of caves, dedicated as a natural temple to (who else?) Lord Buddha. You walk in for a quarter of a mile, guided by the feeble light of a torch which you hire, along with incense and flowers, for a small fee. (We later observe the vendor retrieving the flowers for resale!) The cave is flanked by hundreds of statues of Buddha in every conceivable position. There are tall ones, short ones, old ones, new ones. Buddha standing, Buddha sitting, Buddha lying down. There are statues covered in gold. There are others covered in fungus. The more natural cave formations are clothed in a thick layer of dust and soot, from the innumerable visitors that have trudged through this same darkness. At the end of the rows of statues we find a small, candle lit altar, supporting an inglorious, decaying, but obviously revered, statue of Buddha reclining. Gifts are presented, candles lit, prayers said. Then the others leave.

In my stupid recklessness, I decide to venture further into the cave. Alone. Sue waits behind. Ten minutes later and I am in pitch blackness and total silence. The way is slippery, covered with jagged, cold rocks. No sign of other foolhardy souls ever being here. Fifteen minutes pass and I disturb the local bat "hang out". You'll have to excuse the pun. I am instantly submerged beneath a torrent of thousands of small, chirping, fluttering mammals, all intent on squeezing past this unwelcome intruder. As if to demonstrate the prowess of their radar, not one of them even came close to touching me, even when I extinguished the torch and stood silently in total darkness. Twenty minutes in and the ground is now slippery, tractionless mud and bat droppings. Once I fall and the torch breaks open. I fumble through the mud to retrieve the parts. Luckily I find them and am able to reassemble it. I breath a huge sigh of relief when it works! Twenty five minutes in, and the path is too treacherous to continue. Besides, I don't know how long the torch will last. I turn back, following the marks in the mud. I see an albino cave cricket, oblivious in its blindness to my light. Half an hour later I'm in the warm, fresh air of the outside world, much to the relief of Sue!

We now turn south where we attempt to find our way to the "tourist display" of elephants at work. We had a picture plus the words "elephants working" written in Thai to help in asking directions. Following the numerous pointing fingers led us not to the tourist display, but to where REAL work was being done using elephants! At the end of a really rough, steep logging trail we see half a dozen elephants, each mounted by a "driver" who communicated his wishes to the elephant by gestures and a few words. The incredible amount of control over the actions of the elephant displayed by their masters suggested to me that here I was observing a form of "external brain transplant", such was the oft-unspoken connection between elephant and human! We spent a good hour or so watching and admiring this display of skill and strength. One giant elephant in particular impressed us. He would deftly roll a log into position, lift it carefully, balancing it on his huge tusks, hold it there for as long as desired with his trunk, then place it gently wherever it needed to go. All this was accomplished with very few commands. It was as if the elephant could read the mind of its master.

The younger elephants were asked to do less skilful tasks, like towing logs on chains, pushing them with their leathery trunks, or towing large, lumbering carts. Nearby was a bulldozer clearing the jungle for a road. Next to these magnificent beasts it looked awkward, clumsy, noisy and foul smelling... and not the least bit intelligent! If I may be excused for a little anthropomorphism, I sensed that the elephants were healthy, happy, and actually appearing to revel in their work! The loggers were pleased to see us take such an interest and didn't hesitate to show off... to see an elephant rear skywards, supported only by its massive rear legs, bellowing loudly was a fantastic sight. What a thrill! We could have watched in fascination all day, but it soon came time to move on.

Once again we headed south, this time to Mae Rim, where we found ourselves in the midst of thousands of people, stalls, monks, noise and traffic... The Sunday Carnival was happening! We stop for a "look-see" but, as in Malaysia, it reminds us of the Easter Show, so we leave. Besides, after the tranquility of the falls, the peace of the caves and the joy of the elephant watching we just couldn't stand the noise and the crowds. Back to Chiang Mai for a bite of lunch, then westwards where we visit once more the infectious peace and beauty of Wat Prasingh.

We then check out the huge University. Four acres of a sensitive and beautiful mix of modern and traditional architecture and parklands. What a contrast to the multi-storeyed ugliness of New South Wales University! We stop at the cemetery and great hall that together make up Wat Suan Dork where huge gold plated statues rest on an altar beneath an intricately carved and decorated roof. Thousands could sit in this giant hall. The largest of the cemetery pagodas contain relics of Buddha himself and the many other smaller pagodas hold relics of old Chiang Mai personalities.

Nearby is a shop selling hill-tribe art work and artifacts. It is really a small, government sponsored museum of hill tribe culture. It was fascinating. We then speed off up a rough, potholed road (where we buckle the rear wheel) to the ruins of Wat Jed Yod (built in 1477). This is an incredibly large complex on which Time has not been kind. Most of it has returned to the dust from whence it came. The impermanence of man made things is more obvious in this tropical, humid environment. The Museum was next on our agenda but it was closed, so up the mountain we climb! Talk about steep! The poor little bike is tearing itself to pieces and the rear wheel is becoming less round by the minute.

Wat Doi Sutep with its 2000 steps and its 3000 foot high view is our next stop. Now this place really IS incredible! It also contains bones of Buddha and is a VERY holy place. Down below, Chiang Mai looks like an oasis of dark green in the midst of a light green, flat desert. It truly is a city of trees and golden temples... what a sight! Here we have our first encounter with the Meos - the hill-tribe people. They are busy selling their wares to the tourists. One thousand feet higher and we arrive at the Bhubung Palace, the summer residence of the King. It looks just like an English country mansion, but with a roof like that of a temple, and set incongruously in a tropical paradise. The King wasn't home, so we showed ourselves around!

Sue's bum was by now very sore so I continued on alone through the gathering dusk, up an incredibly steep, slippery, mud-covered track to the Meo village. Here I saw a disappointing collection of tin sheds and old shacks, inhabited by a dirty, lost-looking people of Tibetan origin, now living pitifully off the tourists at the temple. Occasionally I would catch glimpses of their former, more proud way of life... their magnificent costumes, their hand-crafted tools, huts dug out of the earth with ground-hugging roofs. However, I got the unsettling impression that I was witnessing the sad demise of yet another culture, seduced by the irresistible promises of materialism. Ah, well, it's ultimately their choice. Who am I to interfere by pointing out how short sighted such a sell-out might be!

Covered in bat dung and mud, back wheel gyrating alarmingly, we descend the mountain and enjoy an open-air meal in Chiang Mai, chatting about everything from elephants to vegetarians; from acupuncture to Buddhism. Sue is quite an interesting person. It's a pity we didn't get to know one another better in Bali. Time flies by. Two meals and four hours later (10 o'clock) I return the bike under the cover of darkness to its unsuspecting owner and crash into bed, happy at the day's efforts.

## **Day 87: Mon 9/6/75**

Well, I'm on the move again. On the bank's doorstep when it opens, to pay for the bike! Then aboard a bus to a place with the unlikely name of Fang. The promised "three hour trip" turns into a five hour marathon. The first part of the trip is on the Chiang Dao road, the same way that we came yesterday. The country consists of broad, flat plains, terminated on one side by a rugged mountain range, more or less delineating the Burmese border. It is into these mountains that we now climb. It is a slow, rough and steep ascent. The bus is a far cry from the shiny, chromed Mercedes of Bangkok. It is a windowless, wooden, unpainted rattle-trap with an often-used extra low gear. The mountain path affords stupendous views... a welcome relief from the monotony of the rice-dominated plains further south. Thailand's highest peak is nearby, one of many inhabited only by semi-nomadic hill-tribes... descendants of Burmese, Chinese and Tibetan stock. Engine groaning, we pass beautiful fern glens, giant bamboo forests, waterfalls, rapids and rainforests. The road is windy and oh-so incredibly steep. In parts it is very rough and in need of considerable repair. I am befriended by a Burmese guy who spent most of our conversation criticising the Burmese government and whispering how he plans to defect to Thailand. This is not an uncommon experience in these parts!

Eventually we arrive in the tiny mountain village of Fang. There is but one hotel, naturally called the Hotel Fang. I check into a grotty little room which encourages me to spend as little time as possible in it. It takes me all of 10 minutes to circumnavigate the town. There is only one street containing a few stalls, but there is an interesting market where I spend some time doing a few sketches and getting acquainted with a few locals. These people look quite different from those further south... more of a Chinese influence. They are smaller and lighter skinned. They are very easy going, open and friendly. Virtually no-one speaks English, but we manage to communicate quite well regardless.

DIGRESSION: In Malaysia it was common to have your bus boarded by an unannounced "ticket inspector" in the middle of nowhere. And pity help you if you'd lost your ticket! In Thailand this little ritual doesn't happen as much. Instead you are frequently stopped and the entire bus is searched by young soldiers looking not for tickets but for guns, alcohol and drugs.

TO CONTINUE: The quiet, slow life of Fang is welcome, but I can't see myself staying here for too long. Sunset brings with it a ferocious thunderstorm and I seek shelter in a small restaurant where, happily, I meet the only other Europeans in the village... a Danish girl and an English guy. We occupy the time, until 11 o'clock, with eating, drinking and pleasant conversation (what else?). He is a volunteer worker in Dacca (Bangladesh)

and was able to tell many disturbing stories of life in that pitiful country. Like mothers who deliberately deform their babies so they can beg more profitably when they grow up. Or mothers eating the meagre rations meant for their babies. Stories of government corruption and incompetence, of disease-ridden refugee camps. Stories of hopelessness; of a people with little future. These were two of Life's "good" people. They had also just returned from a two-day's jungle jaunt and we talked about the hill-tribe people. Of their adaptation to rapid change. Of their disappearing customs and beliefs. I would love to go on a similar jaunt but really need someone to go with. The cost of a guide is rather high and I would like to share not only the costs but the experiences with someone close. Oh, well, next time, maybe. The rain stops as quickly as it began so we adjourn our cosy little group and I join the bed bugs, ants, mosquitoes and cockroaches in my room to grab some sleep.

### **Day 88: Tue 10/6/75**

No one seems sure of timetables, etc, so it's best to leave early. Seven o'clock saw me at the Fang bus station. This was a cleared area consisting mainly of potholes and mud, on one side of which was a small hut displaying a timetable, the only part of which that wasn't written in unintelligible Thai was its date... 1968! Eventually I learn that there is no bus to Ta Ton. The road is too rough and muddy. So I must hire a Tuk-tuk. This was not as expensive as it sounds, since I shared the cost with the eight other passengers, mainly women who preferred to squash in the back rather than sit with me in the front. An hour and a half later we had successfully traversed some of the roughest, steepest roads in Thailand and I find myself standing on the banks of the muddy Mae Kok river. The few scattered shacks and lone temple I see around me seem unworthy of being called a village, but Ta Ton it is! Now comes the challenge. To find a boat willing to take me to Chiang Rai. I haggle with one boat owner, but his price is too high. Another says we must wait to see if anyone else will turn up, to make the trip worth his while.

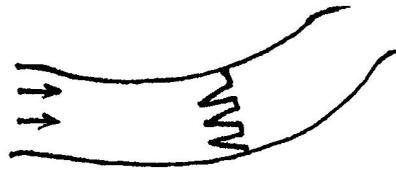
Ta Ton is a very small riverside border community. Here many of the hill people come to trade their wares - cloth, dolls, opium, tobacco, etc. As I wait, I have a good opportunity to observe the style and pace of life in such a village. These people are very different to the "Southerners". Their origins, religions and customs are mixed. Their life is noticeably slower, and although life is obviously hard, they find time to chat, smile and work together. This last observation is important. So many other Thais appear to be so afraid of "involving themselves" with others. Stories I've heard and things I've seen confirm this generalisation. Strangers (Thais as well as foreigners) are rarely approached. If someone needs assistance (heavy luggage, tripped over, being mugged, etc) no-one offers to help. They seem to believe that if you ignore it, it will go away. With such an attitude, I feel that there is little hope for their environment!

Eventually five locals and a Dutchman arrive so at 1 o'clock we begin our voyage down river in a boat not dissimilar to the "longtail" boats in Malaysia. It did, however, differ in a few respects: 1) It possessed a smaller, quieter engine. It was, therefore, not as fast. 2) There was no canopy to shield us from the sun. 3) There were no seats! However, it wasn't as crowded and my sleeping bag was very comfortable to sit on. The trip took 4 hours and cost an expensive \$2. The expense was justified because of the need to negotiate several sets of rapids, one of which was really foaming! The shallow river twisted and turned as it plummeted through an ancient gorge. We dodged trees, rocks and sand bars as we plummeted along with the muddy waters.

Through one particularly narrow section of the gorge the helmsman inexplicably slid below the level of the gunwale, opening the throttle wide as

he did so. We later learnt that on previous trips "rebels" concealed along the shoreline had taken potshots at boats, hoping to disable them and plunder whatever they could from them... including the occasional kidnapped tourist!

It was the skill of the helmsman and his crew on the foredeck as well as the incredible design of the boat that got us to Chiang Rai with barely a scratch on the paintwork... and no signs of bullet-holes! We were all saturated with spray as we played dodgems with the rocks, and at one stage the boat had over a foot of water in her. The many, much appreciated quieter sections gave us a chance to draw breath, bail some of the water, and absorb the spectacular scenery. Once again, limestone cliffs lined the banks, jutting sheer from the otherwise flat plains. In one was a cave, housing a huge statue of a golden Buddha, looking out on the waters as if to check out the foolhardy travelers playing with death. We saw very little wildlife, just the occasional bird and one water-snake swimming at top speed up the river with its head a good foot out of the water. We passed through three sets of fish traps made of bamboo...



The hapless fish don't stand a chance. Those that make it through these traps are bound to be caught by one of the many automatic traps set along the river's edge. Eventually we reach Chaing Rai, a large town that acts as a clearing house for the local produce - mainly rice! A late evening walk around town suggests it has little to offer... just another typical Asian town. So I decide to head for Bangkok tomorrow. The markets here are fascinating, the people a little friendlier, though little English is spoken, and the hotel where I choose to stay the night is cheap and clean, but I feel compelled to leave. I shared my room with the Dutch guy. What a strange, self-important sort of person he was. A genuine weirdo!

**Day 89: Wed 11/6/75**

The 7:30am bus to Bangkok surprisingly left at 7:30am! A slightly different route south compared with the trip north. The mountains before we reached Lampang were quite spectacular, especially as the veil of early morning mist slowly lifted. South of Lampang was the usual plains country, similar to that seen on the trip north, only a little wetter and greener due to the recent rains. The 12 hour trip lands me in Bangkok after nightfall. I grab a bite to eat and crash into yet another hotel. I have a toothache, diarrhea, a sore throat, a headache and am feeling homesick and lonely. Apart from that, everything's fine!

## **Day 90: Thu 12/6/75**

An unexpectedly good day. Not feeling too good (bloody flu again!) I decide to make the most of Bangkok. First stop is Viengthai to book my flight home... That makes me feel better! After breakfast I walk to the National Museum where I spend a good deal of time fascinated by the displays. This is not a technological display like in KL but a vast, well organised display of Buddhist statuary. It shows the history, the art, the various eras, the methods of making, preserving and locating the thousand of Buddhist statues in Thailand. Here he is, standing, sitting, reclining, praying, sleeping, teaching. In gold, bronze, stone, clay, emerald and inlaid with pearl. Big, small, medium, fat, thin, round, sharp, male, female. There was nothing in this Museum that wasn't connected in some way with Buddha.

After a profitable morning in the museum, walking back past the huge Watt Phra Keo, I meet a very friendly Thai guy called Samast Suchantr. In his relatively good English he offers me his "services" for the day, to show me around Bangkok. I am a little wary (the stories I've heard!) but I accept nonetheless. I am glad that I did! We walk and talk for some time. Through the parks being readied for the weekend celebrations, past picketing Thai guards, angry over pay disputes, past temple after magnificent temple. We decide to head south to a place called the Rose Garden. This was a real tourist trap, but Samast showed me how we could climb the wall, saving \$5! The show begins, punctuated by the incessant sounds of clicking cameras owned by the hundreds of rich tourists as they attempt to capture Thailand in an afternoon. In defense of the concept, however, it did provide glimpses of aspects of Thai life and culture that would be difficult to see even in an extended stay.

First came the joyous monk ordination ceremony, followed by the slow, delicate fingernail dance accompanied by an orchestra that appeared to differ little from those seen in Java. Then a display of Thai boxing, also accompanied by music - a strange combination of sounds, led by a flute. Before each bout each combatant goes through an elaborate ritual designed to honour his trainer, then it's a free-for-all. Even biting is allowed! This was followed by an decidedly "faked" hill-tribe dance, performed by spotlessly clean Thais dressed in hill-tribe costumery, displaying forced, plastic smiles. It seemed more like propaganda than culture! Very disappointing.

The cock fight was, however, genuine. And here you could SEE it, unlike in Bali where you could only know that cocks were fighting in the midst of a crowd because someone told you! Then the famous bamboo dance where we all gasped in wonder at their skill and timing as the bamboo poles clashed perilously close to those delicate ankles. Then a display of sword fighting, pole fighting and arm-guard fighting, each preceded by the ritual honouring

their trainers. It was, of course, well choreographed but nonetheless provided quite a spectacle of skill and speed.

A mock courting dance (with audience participation) and a wedding ceremony followed. We then all adjourned to the outside where a circle of men gave a demonstration of Takaew, a game like volleyball where a small rattan ball is kept from hitting the ground by making contact with any part of the body EXCEPT the hands. I just love this game. We saw it being played all over Malaysia, often by small boys displaying skill equal to these professionals. We then saw demos of silk weaving, pottery and as a grand finale, the elephants. Here they were deftly rolling and retrieving logs in a concrete pool. Quite a dramatic difference to their REAL habitat of misty, muddy jungle! Another display (not advertised) that interested and amused me was the "tourist". This is a remarkable sub-species. I find it difficult to identify with most of the camera-toting throngs witnessing this sanitised version of Thai culture. I wonder what they are really getting out of their travels as they are whisked away in their air conditioned coaches to view yet another intricately planned spontaneous travel experience.

At least their departure left Samat and I alone to enjoy the solitude of the beautiful gardens... yes, unsurprisingly, mainly roses! We talk quietly of many aspects of Thai life - from wages to politics; from religion to education. I try to cram as much as possible into my addled brain. I certainly learnt more than a \$5 show could teach me! Feeling better, I return home, eat, do my washing and curl up on my oversize bed with a book on Buddhism...

### **Day 91: Fri 13/6/75**

And so I walk. First stop is Wat Traimit, containing a priceless solid gold Buddha. I wonder at the irony of such extravagance spent in praise of a man whose main claim to fame was to denounce everything worldly. Oh, well. That's what I've come to expect from Man and his concept of religion, I guess. On through the early morning bustle of an awakening city to the Post Office which yields welcoming word from Mum and Dad - and a pleasantly unexpected reaction from Dad to my homecoming decision. I really can't wait to get home now. South now to the shops of Sathon where I nearly break the bank buying a few items for those at home... I hope they appreciate them. This is Bangkok's hotel area, and some of them look very fancy indeed.

With shopping completed I hop on an 8 cent ferry ride up river. None of your \$5 tourist trips, thank you! Bangkok displays yet another face when viewed from the water... that stinking brown/black syrup they laughingly call a river. The houses lean precariously over this stinking soup, so fragile-looking that I'm tempted to hold my breath as we pass in case it's power might cause them to collapse. Bangkok's canals are just as busy as the roads. And most of the boats also have horns! The skill of the helmsmen is something I will never cease to admire... especially when they manage to reverse their craft into a hopelessly overcrowded wharf, fighting a swift current and with no assistance from shore or use of ropes. Quite remarkable.

I alight 20 minutes later at the Wat Phra Keo and who should I meet? Right. Samast. I mentioned yesterday that I might be coming here today and he has waited for me all morning. His happy face was a welcome sight indeed. They wanted 50 cents to enter the temple, so through a side entrance we go for free. This huge complex of several acres has at its focus a relatively small, rotund version of Buddha. Why is this statue so important? It's made of solid emerald, that's why. Singapore's Tiger Balm Garden has nothing on this place. It is so complex, intricate and ornate that it almost takes your breath away. You get dizzy just walking amongst the colourful spires, domes and statues, through narrow doorways leading to dark sanctuaries lit only by incense laden candles. It is difficult to imagine such a place in the middle of one of the most hectic cities on the planet. It is so peaceful and timeless. Any quiet contemplation in this world of fantasy soon leads you to question the reality of your perceptions. Is that chaos outside the wall any more real than the feelings of inner peace I'm now experiencing? I begin to understand the reason why Buddhists value such places, not as an escape from reality, but as a medium for experiencing another, more internal sort of reality.

Such musings are short lived. We walk further down the road to an even more incredible temple... Wat Pho, the temple of the Reclining Buddha. This statue is not merely big. It is not even huge. It is colossal. And, naturally, the

building in which it is housed is gargantuan! Inside we encounter Buddha, resting peacefully and enigmatically on his side, his right arm gracefully supporting his enormous head. He fills the entire building! Nowhere can you stand back to see all of him. His feet are flat and inlaid with acres of mother of pearl. His huge head is the size of a small mountain. Both building and statue are in the process of restoration, but even the extensive scaffolding looked like minute matchsticks beside Buddha's immenseness.

Samast had promised to wait at the side gate, but I guess I was longer than he expected since he wasn't there when I breathlessly emerged some time later. On my own once again, I attempt entry into the Royal Palace. No go. They expect a tie and a coat! A slow, circuitous walk back to the hotel takes me through the heart of Chinatown and alongside the docks. I would frequently sit and watch the people in their purposeful hustle and bustle as I try to summarise my experiences. I am getting to know these people better, now. Smiles are more easily come by now than when I was a confused newcomer in this crazy city. Funny, but I feel no fear about walking alone, even at night, down streets that many would think twice about driving down. Perhaps I believe all too strongly in the sociological version of Newton's Third Law... where every action has an equal reaction. It seems to work, though!

I watch the organised chaos of riverside life until nightfall reminds me of how tired I am. Now, which way was my hotel? Who cares, I'll take this road, it looks interesting! I wonder where that music is coming from? It's from inside that small temple over there. I wonder... well, no-one has stopped me. I'm inside now. Well, what do you know, Ramayana! Thai style. I watch for half an hour until it ends. Here we have the same time-honoured story (Rama/ Sita/ Hanoman/ evil spirits, etc) but the Thai version is somewhat more dramatic, in the sense that there is much talking and the dancing is VERY stylised. Being the only Farong (white man) I am very conspicuous and several people try communicating with me. I wish I understood Thai! The costumes are as ornate and as colourful as their temples. They even have temple-like spires on their heads! As in Indonesia, the dancers are all women. Most are very young. One is very old. The audience is somewhat transient. Some come to pray for a while, others chat away, competing with both the dramatic dialogue and the outside traffic noise penetrating the incense-saturated hall. Even though this display lacked the professional "polish" of the Rose Garden version, I feel very lucky to have witnessed it. Stumbling upon an unexpected demonstration of Thai culture conjured fond memories of Bali where such events were commonplace...

### **Days 92-93: Sat-Sun 14-15/6/75**

A day to remember! Up very early after a restless night, excited with anticipation. Off to the Palace lawn for the weekend market. I arrive just as the stalls are being assembled and I spend the morning wandering around, just soaking it all in... the smells, the sounds, the sights, the food! Roast chicken, roast cockroaches, goods from all over Asia, hawkers chanting their "selling songs". Hundreds of people milling through the endless variety of stalls where yesterday there was merely a pathway. I buy a few mementos, find a place to sit and observe the whole fascinating scene. I cogitate on the different meaning a market has for vendor and tourist. For the stallholder this is a time when others decide how well they will eat tonight... or whether they'll eat at all! For the tourist this is an amusement, a chance to feel superior, to show off their wealth.

My imminent departure seems to come so slowly... I arrive at the airport an hour too early, enabling me to get through the formalities at my leisure. However, I am eventually aboard the long-awaited home-bound 747. The patchwork greenery of Thailand rapidly disappears astern to be replaced by random, white-fringed emeralds sprinkled over the velvet blue of The Gulf of Siam. My last Asian sunset just has to be a beauty. And it is! We fly over Kota Bahru, once again seeing that sinuous, muddy river that provided us with our jungle transport some 3 weeks earlier. By Singapore it is dark. The brilliance of Singapore's glittering lights reminds me of the pleasures experienced in that city over six weeks ago. We have steak and chips, all sorts of music and even a film to help while away the dark hours. I even manage to snatch an hour or two of disturbed sleep. Breakfast arrives (ahhh, a Western breakfast!) and I see the lights of Alice Springs drifting northwards far below. The other Aussies on board all seem so friendly, so familiar, so straightforward, so BIG. The Captain gives us the football results over the intercom. I'm home!

After a half hour spent in the antiseptic whiteness of Melbourne's transit lounge we are airborne, witnessing a spectacular sunrise. The western sky is still black and starlit. To the east, the blackness merges with blue, then yellow, then red, to eventually meet the clouds on the horizon through which the glowing ball of solar fire slowly emerges, casting long, misty shadows over the dewy greenness below. Into this fairyland world is spun the dew-dropped sparkling web of lights that define the circuitous byways of Canberra. What a scene!

We begin our descent. The thick, low mist hugs the frost covered ground, faithfully following the contours of the valleys. Sydney looms into sight. Seven o'clock landing after a long but enjoyable 11 hour flight. I am home!



## **Singapore, Malaysia, Thailand Revisited**

Click [HERE](#) for photos (including Egypt).

*After my 1975 adventure I settled down in Sydney, Australia with a job as a Biology teacher, marrying the girl I had missed so much while away, Glenys. Since then we have traveled together to many places - Europe, Vanuatu, Easter Island, South America, New Zealand, Egypt, Turkey, Greece, Vietnam, Thailand, Malaysia, Singapore, China, Mongolia, Russia, Japan... as well as all over our own beautiful island-continent, Australia.*

*In December 1989 Glenys and I, together with our friend Stephanie, journeyed to Egypt, Singapore, Malaysia and Thailand. As usual I kept a diary and took pictures as a record of that trip. Since I had travelled to South East Asia nearly 15 years earlier I couldn't help but compare the experiences.*

*What follows is the South East Asia extract from that trip. Having spent the first few weeks in Egypt, the following diary entries begin on Day 24, flying into Singapore via Bangkok...*

### **Day 24: Fri 19/1/90**

A relatively smooth flight. I even managed, somewhat miraculously, to get some sleep. With good food and great service - if it wasn't for the unfortunate overbooking incident in Cairo, I wouldn't hesitate to recommend Singapore Airways. We flew from Cairo to Bangkok where, after an hour or so, we flew on to Singapore. Since most of the flight was in daylight I got to see much of India from the air... and what a depressing sight it is, too - mile after mile of cultivation, damming, felling, erosion, burning. In fact everything we saw seems consistent with Man's flawed view that this is his world to do with whatever he wants. Not much of "Nature" left! And the entire trip was through an atmosphere heavily tinted with a brown haze. In some cases (for example, as we approached Bangkok) the brown was almost black. What a mess we are making of this precious planet!

We arrived in Singapore at 7pm local time, after losing 7 hours. We couldn't help but compare the super efficiency of Changi with the chaos of Cairo airport - the Singaporeans really know how to manage details and to help the tourist to know what to expect.

After some super-efficient money-changing and the super-efficient check-out at the airport, we caught a super-efficient taxi to our hotel, with the unlikely name of The Regional Language Centre. It turns out to be a pretty posh establishment! We're on the 13th floor with a spectacular view over downtown Singapore. This level of luxury was quite unexpected after the

digs we had encountered in Egypt, and took us by surprise. G and S can't stop talking about the coin-op laundry service!

I'm looking forward to a sound night's sleep... and I won't even need my earplugs!

### **Day 25: Sat 20/1/90**

We decided that two days in Singapore is not enough, so extended our stay for another night. We all awoke latish, still suffering a little jet-lag. G and S were in raptures at having found a Laundromat in the hotel, resulting in us spending a good part of the morning waiting for our washing to be done! Eventually we escaped from watching our entangled clothes go round, and headed for the Science Centre, a half hour bus journey away. What a great place this is... featuring an animated dinosaur exhibit that surpassed the one we saw in Sydney; an exhibit of Human evolution, emphasising the Chinese contributions to recent human history; plus there was a vast array of buttons to press, puzzles to solve, noises to make, wheels to turn, etc. Four hours of great, informative fun.

We ate a late lunch, then back to the hotel for (you guessed it!) the laundry. With our energies slightly renewed by a short siesta, we ventured forth once more - this time into the heart of town. Orchard Road is just one long shopping complex. We discovered that Raffles' Hotel is hidden behind an opaque hoarding telling us that it is being renewed and renovated (dammit!). We easily located the Merlion. And we learned that Compact Discs are no cheaper here than in Sydney.

At least some of the flavour of the "old" Asia was encountered when we ate in an outdoor, but very hygienic-looking "Satay Centre". Singapore is an organised, clean, efficient city. Little appears to be left to chance here - even the quality of the street vendor's food. As is often our luck, we happened to be in town on an auspicious day... the 25th Anniversary of Singapore's "freedom", coinciding with the imminent Chinese New Year - the Year of the Horse. Consequently there was MUCH festivity and celebration going on. The streets were overflowing with people. There were Chinese puppets, Chinese operas, even a Chinese Rock Concert!

At one of the Chinese operas they projected the Chinese and English translations as the actors sang. I thought that this would make this enigmatic art-form more understandable but, for me, it only added to the confusion... the whole thing seemed to be about her washing her hands and preparing tea for the king! Quite weird.

We were readily caught up in the throngs, willingly tasting the sights, sounds and smells swirling around us. Our meanderings took us through Chinatown,

where the volume of people in the streets actually increased... the colour, movement and sound of it all was really special - and we only got lost once! We caught the MRT (Mass Rapid Transport) and a taxi back to the hotel where we eventually got to sleep, well after midnight.

### **Day 26: Sun 21/1/90**

Quite a day. After a restless sleep (my body clock is probably still operating on Cairo time) we awoke to a welcome breakfast of bacon and eggs - and toast! Then off by bus to Sentosa Island. We crossed by ferry and then made use of the free island buses and monorail to visit the following:

1. The Coralarium. An interesting, informative view of life on a coral reef... containing what I suspect is the only coral reef left around Singapore. Here we also encountered a mix of wildlife, including turtles, macaws, numerous molluscs, etc.
2. Fort Siloso. These are the remnants of the island's western defences... complete with realistic mannequins and recordings of "war" sounds. A bit scary.
3. Rare Stone Museum. Not at all what I expected. It consisted of a rock collection made by five generations of a Chinese family... collected not necessarily for their "geological" interest but for the patterns revealed by the rock's veins, crystals, etc. Revealed in the rocks were mountains, waterfalls, people and animals. Very interesting and unusual.
4. "Pioneers" Museum. What a superb exhibition - and all for a paltry \$2. Life-size dioramas, video/audio shows, static displays, etc. used very effectively to represent the history of Singapore, the colonisation, the Japanese invasion, etc. Very well done - as are most things we've seen in this city.
5. Sentosa itself. This is a beautiful little island... No wonder they're intending to build two huge resorts here. I'm glad, however, that we got to see it before it is totally "modernised".

After seven hours on this beautiful island we rode the cable car back to the mainland - Glenys surprised herself with her new-found bravery. Then by bus back to Orchard Road where we decided to hang around as preparations appeared to be happening for some sort of parade. We had dinner (in a Pizza Hut!) while we waited before witnessing a series of displays of music, costume and dance by several school/community groups as they followed one another down the blocked-off street. The colour, the noise, movement and youthful enthusiasm combined to make quite a spectacle. How do we continually manage to accidentally be in just the right place in just the right time for such festivities?

Counting our pennies we decided to walk home where we had our first little "heart-to-heart" talk where we ironed out some of those pesky annoyances that seem inevitable when three people live so intimately together for weeks on end. Anyway, it all seems better now, so I hope to be able to get some more restful sleep tonight in preparation for our exodus to (I hope) a real Asian city tomorrow, Melaka...

### **Day 27: Mon 22/1/90**

Up with stomach cramps at 3:30am, followed by little sleep until 7:30 when the others awoke. So much for a restful night! A tentative brecky of porridge and toast then by taxi (with a very extrovert Chinese taxi driver) to the Lavender St bus station. As luck would have it, we managed to buy the last three seats on the aircon bus to Melaka - five hours away.

The journey was relatively uneventful - a tiring, often boring bus trip is one of the prices you must pay for a traveling life. G and S get their first glimpses of rubber and oil palm trees. I'm almost certain it won't be their last! Malaysia certainly is a poor cousin to Singapore - and yet it seems to have "advanced" significantly since I was last here... much more traffic, more modern buildings, less obvious filth and poverty. Once again, our Aussie passports guaranteed us a hassle-free passage through the immigration process.

Our worries about finding a hotel were to prove unfounded as we were greeted by a scrum of people at the bus station all extolling the virtues of their particular hotel. We chose the "Majestic" at \$35M a night. We were driven there in style in two trishaws... their spindly drivers hardly working up a sweat in the Melakan heat.

The "Majestic", while not quite living up to its name, is certainly interesting... an old "Chinese-style" construction with gigantic rooms, each with two huge beds, a fan and air-conditioning. We were duly impressed. Such a pity the walls don't quite reach the ceilings, though.

After checking in we took a leisurely stroll around this wonderful little town... past shops overflowing with goods at ridiculously cheap prices, down streets humming with activity - both pedestrian and vehicular. The streets seem much cleaner than I remember from 15 years ago. And the people generally appear to be more prosperous. In fact the town sports several huge hotels that were mere gleams in the eye of an enterprising developer back in 1974.

The riverside dwellings are, however, much as I remember them, and the distinct smell of sewage pervading the river was unmistakable. But at least that elusive quality - character - seems to have been retained. All three of us felt comfortable with this place.

Our walk took us to a large Chinese temple where the combination of Tao, Confucianism and Buddhism has produced an interesting amalgam of building and behaviour that we couldn't hope to even begin to comprehend. From this ancient place we crossed the street to a new Buddhist temple - glistening in its polished marble and spotless icons.

On we walked to a mosque, where we all had to remove our shoes and G and S had to don black gowns - which actually ended up being shorter than their own skirts, but "them's the rules" so who are we to argue.

Leaving the mosque we were attracted by the erratic beating of a drum. We soon found its source - a Hindu temple, inside of which were two musicians (the drummer and a trumpeter), a couple of Hindu priests, four or five Indian women, a couple of men and another tourist. When we motioned that we wanted to enter the drummer nodded his agreement, so in we went. Inside we were greeted by a rising crescendo of rhythm, a deafening wail of trumpet, and the dramatic parting of an incense-shrouded curtain to reveal a sacred Hindu icon. This was followed by a small procession to the various other altars and icons where the same rituals were enacted, keenly observed by a small but growing number of devotees appearing through the haze. At each icon a variety of incenses were burnt, flames waved and water poured as the head priest continually tinkled his bell and uttered a few incantations - ably assisted by his similarly toga-clad offsider. Not that we could hear any of what was being said above the clamour of the musicians in the resonant anteroom. An interesting experience... if we thought we might have had a remote chance of understanding the goings-on back in the Buddhist temple, we would have Buckley's chance understanding what was happening here!

Hunger then drove us back to our posh hotel neighbour (The Ramada) where we had a relatively cheap but very posh dinner - with my stomach still queasy I wasn't ready to try the street food. Then back "home" to The Majestic, foot-sore and leg-weary, and with ominous rumblings coming from deep inside. Hoping for a good night's sleep!

### ***Day 28: Tue 23/1/90***

At last, a beaut night's sleep. After a bracing cold shower (no hot water!) and a terrific brecky (even though the stomach is still a little queasy) we head out for another walking tour:

Firts to the beautifully restored, striking bright red Christ Church. Then to the Post Office to mail postcards. Then to the bank to replenish our monetary stores. Then the steep climb up St Paul's Hill to the remains of the eponymous church. Built and rebuilt several times since 1571 it has seen many conquerors

come and go. Francis Xavier apparently was even buried here for a short time as it is reputed to have been his favourite chapel.

Down the other side of the hill to the Porta de Santiago - all that remains of the once huge old Portuguese fort (a Formosa), rebuilt by the Dutch in 1670, destroyed by the British. Such stories of greed and conquest could these old walls tell! But still they stand, bearing mute witness to the waves of colonial empire builders who saw Malaka as a strategic gateway to the riches of the Orient.

Then across the road in the gathering heat of the day to the Memorial Hall - dedicated to Malaya's independence from Britain in 1957 - full of mementos, relics and descriptions of almost anything that had even the remotest connection with this historic event.

Then to a privately owned full-scale replica of the Melaka Sultanate Palace, which now houses the Melaka Cultural Centre. Inside were beautifully presented displays of past glories and present culture... with full-scale and small-scale dioramas depicting scenes from Melaka's turbulent and colourful past. Great stuff!

Feeling the heat (and the thirst) we decided it was time for lunch, so headed back to the Main Square. On the way we encountered the well-preserved remains of the very old Dutch/British graveyard... with a giant fig tree now benefiting, no doubt, from the European habit of burying their dead!

Several lo-o-ong drinks and a plate or two of delicious food later and we were ready for the afternoon's effort:

Firstly to the nearby handicraft centre. Nice stuff, but pricy. Then to the Sultan's Well, built in 1409, conquered, poisoned, re-conquered, re-poisoned, etc. many times by Portuguese, Dutch, British... The original "crystal clear, sweet water" looks decidedly dubious now. Then to the Sam Po Kong Temple, another fairly typical Chinese temple, but very old (1409!). The Sam Po, by the way, is a fish which, so legend has it, blocked a hole in some ancient Chinese ship, preventing it from foundering.

Rising up behind this temple is the hill called Bukit China - a Chinese graveyard which has been in use for centuries. In fact we learn that it is the oldest Chinese cemetery outside of China. The locals here have been fighting to prevent this hill from being "developed" and, so far, have won their battle.

Trudging wearily homewards we took a small detour to visit an old Catholic Church - St Peter's - containing a life-size alabaster statue of Christ before the Resurrection... very odd.

Then back to the hotel for more hydration and a welcome siesta. Duly refreshed we ventured once more into the streets of Melaka... more specifically to the outdoor markets in search of those elusive souvenirs. Then to a "Restoran" for a Chinese nosh and back "home" perchance to sleep...

### ***Day 29: Wed 24/1/90***

That bloody intrusive alarm clock! Up, reluctantly, early for a cold bucket-over-the-head shower, breakfast of runny eggs and toast, then a short walk over the footbridge to the bus station in time for the 10am bus to Kuala Lumpur. We find that there is no 10 o'clock bus (no-one knows why!) but we book for the 11 o'clock, giving us time to explore the local library... which nostalgically reminds us of country NSW libraries of 15 years ago. Quaint.

The bus trip took us three and a half hours (including a stop for lunch) and passed through coastal towns and rural villages. There were signs of large-scale land clearing, erosion and housing development nearly everywhere... just what you expect to see, unfortunately, in a country with an exploding population.

We hurriedly decided to get off the bus at the first bus station we reached approaching KL... so hurriedly that I left my jacket on the bus! This oversight resulted in the three of us hurriedly squeezing into a taxi to chase the bus into the gigantic Express bus terminal. Luckily I was able to find the bus and the driver who opened allowed us back onto the bus where, lo and behold, I was reunited with my jacket!

We purchased our KL bus tickets then haggled for a cab to take us to the Station hotel. We eventually found a "long distance" taxi with a Chinese driver who required little prompting to freely explain to us how difficult it had become to freely discuss the shortcomings of the current Malaysian government!

The Station was full, but there was no shortage of vociferous "advisors" in the form of enthusiastic taxi drivers all touting for other accommodation. We chose the unlikely-named Hotel Mexico, out near the YMCA. Once "settled in" we decided that it would be difficult to become even more hot and sweaty so, after booking ahead for Penang, we walked into town. Our first "sight" was the Railway Station... and what a fantastic sight it is too - in the true sense of the word "fantastic". Then on to the national mosque... no luck, though, it was closed for renovations. So across the road we went, to the National Islamic Centre where once again we had to cover ourselves with long robes. The Centre was like a gigantic complex of mosques, all with that all-too-familiar "stark" look with the omni-present loud and distorted prayers resonating through their cavernous interiors.

We escaped from the interminable praising of Allah and peeked inside the nearby railway station which looked so very "Victorian". We then ambled our weary way to Chinatown where, of all things, we re-discovered the English Hot Bread Shop where we pigged out on all sorts of yummy breads and pastries.

Wandering through the usual street markets we found a bookshop and temporarily indulged our cravings for anything written in English. We next encountered a large Hindu temple where a ceremony similar to yesterday's was going on - thankfully minus the throbbing accompaniment. While it was a larger congregation and the icons were more "spectacular", it didn't seem to have the same "mystical" quality as the Malaccan version... perhaps because there were more onlookers, there was no music and the temple itself, while being much more ornate, was more open and not as smokily claustrophobic.

We next trudged our weary way back to "the Mex" for a Chinese nosh, a relaxing reading and writing time and, eventually, sleep.

### ***Day 30: Thu 25/1/90***

Up before the crack of dawn, a little rapid abluting then off by taxi to the local bus station... an hour early! After a beaut buffet breakfast in the terminal's hotel we boarded the bus for Penang. Here are a few impressions of the journey to Penang:

We are the only "Westerners" in a full bus. It took nearly an hour just to negotiate the KL traffic. Climbing the hills out of KL we passed pockets of apparently untouched jungle, numerous sprawling factories (mainly rubber, palm oil and cement) and noted considerable erosion wherever the hillsides had been cleared.

Heading for Ipoh, we passed the inevitable rubber, palm oil and coconut plantations, saw beautiful "mountain vistas" - with distant craggy peaks capped with grey, swirling clouds that threatened, but never actually produced, rain. On the occasional mountaintop I could discern the odd large structure - most likely resorts where the rich go to escape the lowland heat. We struggled up sinuous mountain passes, through a huge tunnel cut through the limestone, and down the newly completed expressway on the other side of the range. We saw many Chinese graveyards, several of which seemed to be rapidly reclaimed by the lush jungle surrounding them. We were frequently saddened to see the ugly scars left by limestone mining and open-cut tin mining. We were constantly harangued by the same "Happy New Year" song (in Chinese) played over and over on the bus's PA system... when we weren't being treated to an unintelligible Kung Fu move, that is!

We saw the inevitable roadside altars and the remaining Police Compounds, surrounded by their double fences and barbed wire... yes, they are still wary of a Communist insurgence in this area!

Of course, we also glimpsed the numerous limestone caves to the south of Ipoh... most of which contained a temple at their entrances, some of which looked remarkably precarious. The rainforest/limestone geography was, naturally, just stunning... sheer fingers of white limestone protruding skywards, delicately supporting lush greenness in every available crevice. Some of these limestone pillars were so high that they disappeared into the mist... others were unfortunate to be so available that they were being blasted into oblivion for their precious lime!

Eight hours later, at 5pm, we reached Butterworth where a taxi driver tried his best to "take us" for \$45. We graciously declined his kind offer and took the ferry instead, for 40c return! An hour later we slumped into our hotel room (The Pathe Hotel) in Penang. We were hot, sticky and buggered... we had foolishly walked from the ferry quay with all our luggage!

When we had (almost!) recovered we washed most of our clothes and went to a local Indian restaurant for a most delicious Chicken Curry, followed by a memory-laden sugar roti... ahhh, bliss! A gentle walk around the old Penang streets and back to the hotel - following a minor deviation into the dingy bar attached to the hotel, looking for mineral water... When the "waitress" responded to our innocent request with a "Yes, you pay by the hour", we knew we had stumbled into the wrong place!

### **Day 31: Fri 26/1/90**

Awoken by the frostbite advancing up my extremities, I got up to turn off our super-efficient air-conditioner and snuggle back beneath my one thin blanket (no sheets!). Soon after I was genuinely awake, though, to be even further awakened by a bracing cold shower (no hot water!). We set off for the super-elegant Eastern and Oriental for breakfast... which cost more than our room at the Pathe!

Following an envious sticky-beak around the E&O, to see how the rich people travel, we walked across Penang to confirm our Thailand tickets (all OK), then to a nearby travel agent to book our taxi for tomorrow (4:15am, ugh!). On the way we admired by daylight the Hindu temple we saw last night, and the Kapitan Klung mosque. After dropping off our various purchases (mainly T-shirts) at our hotel we crossed the road to Fort Cornwallis - or what remains of the Fort, where we were able to touch cannons which were already old when Australia was discovered! We then had a very hot mee goreng lunch in the street stalls beside the Fort before walking to the Museum... which, naturally, was closed.

We caught a taxi to Wat Chayamangkalaram where we were astounded by the colour, complexity and intricacy of this Thai-style Buddhist temple. Inside is a gigantic reclining Buddha, recently made out of fibreglass, surrounded by images from Buddhist stories, and urns containing the ashes of the lucky faithful who have long gone to the next life. Across the road we went, to the Burmese version of Buddhism... just as ornate and "kitsch" but somehow a little more serene, due to the liberal presence of water in the form of a large pond with its cooling fountain.

We then caught a taxi back to the Museum which was by now open. Inside were many objects from Malaysia's and Penang's past... including a multitude of mementos from Tunku Abdul Rahman. Upstairs was a small art collection by a Chinese artist whom we actually met - he has a child attending Beacon Hill High! Next to the Museum we visited (of all things) an early Anglican church called, of course, St George's. How austere and solemn it appeared when compared with the temples we'd just seen.

We once more set off into the nearly-deserted streets (Chinese New Years Eve!) in a vain search for the Koo Kangsi Temple. We found, instead, the Yin Teng temple, supposedly the most popular temple in Penang. Boy, was it a veritable hive of activity... the beggars were already vying for positions out front in readiness for the swarms of worshippers flocking to the temple to make their last minute offerings before the old year passes.

It was then back to the hotel to catch our breath and to soak our aching feet. At sevenish we crossed the road to the edge of the esplanade and sampled our way along the long row of fragrant food stalls, relaxing by the water in the warm evening air... ahh, luxury! I once again delighted in the many-flavoured "ais kechang" (flavoured crushed ice) and pigged out on a wide variety of satays. We then returned to Kuan Yin Teng which was by now abuzz with activity. The place was swarming with people, most of whom were frantically waving incense sticks. The hopeful beggars were lined up alongside the entrances. The temple was now full of smoke, contributed mainly by several gigantic incense sticks (nearly 4 metres long) and three huge fires actively consuming numerous offerings along with hundreds of used incense sticks.

Women were crawling along in front of the main altar, while people of all ages and genders were busily planting burning incense sticks in front of several other altars. Quite a sight... and sound. All around, firecrackers were exploding and lighting up the otherwise quiet Penang streets.

Homewards, then, past our favourite roti restaurant where we pigged out once more, much to the amusement of the other customers and staff - one of

whom was so helpful and genial we just had to take his picture! Finally, back to our hotel-cum-brothel to sleep, pending our 4:15am start tomorrow...

### **Day 32: Sat 27/1/90**

Today is Chinese New Year's Day. Believe it or not, our phone roused us from our slumber at 3:30am with an indecipherable wake-up call from "someone" within our hotel. What unexpected service! Reluctantly we arose but we were soon wide awake, courtesy of an ice-cold shower. Punctual to a fault, we were on the street by exactly 4:15. We needn't have rushed... the taxi arrived at 4:35, only it wasn't at all what we expected... it was a Toyota Hi-Ace diesel, and after it had zigged and zagged around nearly every street in Penang it was crammed with 12 bleary-eyed travelers (one Brit, one Canadian, two Italians and the rest, Aussies). A couple of them looked and acted as if they were still under the influence of various chemical concoctions, making the border crossing merely to extend their Thai visas.

I had the dubious pleasure of sitting in the makeshift seat atop the throbbing engine, next to a 25 year old Australian girl who had "taught for a year, resigned and intended to travel for a year overland to Europe, working if necessary." Sound familiar? She, also, was finding travel to be more expensive than anticipated... sort of "deja-vu"?

Most of the drive to the border was on good divided expressway. We arrived at the border just on daybreak. The "formalities" were easy - our driver arranged it for all of us. Once across the border the road became a little more than a dirt track in places... not that this fact slowed our driver down in any way. He actually seemed to drive even faster, often on the wrong side of the road, despite the occasional scream of terror from more than one of his passengers.

We arrived at Hat Yai at 7:45 (Thai time), had a quick brecky of tea and toast then, after quickly orienting ourselves, set off through the noisy, bustling streets to see what we could see. And it didn't take us long until we stumbled upon something... a ceremony aimed at ridding a large store of "evil spirits". Cymbals, drums, yells, dancing dragons and, as an even noisier climax, strings of highly explosive firecrackers all contributed to the profusion of sound and colour. Naturally, the traffic never stopped, but did slow slightly as it squeezed past the hubbub. In fact, all over the city could be heard the ear-splitting firecracker strings. We frequently had to block our ears just to save our hearing from permanent damage.

As we ambled through the streets and lanes - all of which identified by unreadable, unpronounceable names - stopping at the occasional shop or temple, we were struck by the friendliness of the people and the incessant noise. the latter we attempted to escape by retreating into a coffee shop.

Back, eventually, to the little cafe where we had left our luggage. We paused a little to write diaries, etc. I ended up having a very useful chat with one of the guys that works there, Mr Chan, who shamed us by being able to speak five Chinese dialects, plus Thai, plus English. He quizzed us about our accent and confounded us with such conundrums as why we get IN a car but ON a bus! he then very generously drove us to the airport where the queue for our flight had already begun to form so we joined it, even though the sign said our flight wouldn't begin to be processed until 2pm. When 2pm eventually arrived it had become pretty obvious that there was to be a considerable delay. We began to get concerned about our connecting flight from Bangkok to Chiang Mai... we were going to be cutting it fine even if this flight were on time!

When we eventually breasted the elusive check-in counter, we were immediately offered an alternative direct flight to Chiang Mai which, of course, we jumped at. Two and a half hours, and one "light meal" later we touched down at Chiang Mai airport, just in time to watch the sun set. What luck!

A "limousine" ride later and we were checking in to the Montri hotel... contrary to my expectations they had actually received our deposit and reservation. Amazing! This is a lovely hotel even though we had to have separate double rooms - but at \$17.50 per room per night, who's complaining? Hot water, aircon, soft mattress, sheets... who could want more?

After 30 minutes of R and R (Rest and Recuperation) we decided to walk to the Night Market for dinner. Naturally we got lost and found the Night Bazaar instead... where it appears you can buy ANYTHING. We decided to return when we are not so hungry. Eventually we located the Night Market where we had great difficulty deciding on which of the literally hundreds of foods we should try.

On the walk home we encountered a display of folk dancing where we sat enthralled at the grace and subtlety of movement to the gentle, flowing music. Just beautiful. The people of Chiang Mai certainly know how to make the most of these long, warm evenings to enjoy themselves... I think the entire population of the city is out and about tonight! However, just below the surface of all this hustle and bustle is the inevitable poverty - the beggars, the deformed, the unemployed or unemployable... even those who have work but are paid so poorly and so erratically that they can't escape poverty's vice-like grip. Saddest of all, though, were the Hill Tribe people selling their wares. They looked so out of place, bewildered and lost. All in the name of "progress" I guess?

Back we walked, through the maze of streets, through throngs of people, avoiding the rowdy, smelly tuk-tuks, the trishaws, cars and minibuses. Soon safely tucked away in our hotel room we collapsed, exhausted, onto our bed, with hardly the strength to change out of our clothes... we decided that we had been awake for 21 hours straight!

### **Day 33: Sun 28/1/90**

What a fabulous, and most welcome sleep! We breakfasted in JJ's, attached to our hotel... an "American Breakfast" of toast, tea and eggs! As we walked to get a minibus to Doi Sutep temple, we were accosted by a car driver who offered us that same trip PLUS a Meo Hill Tribe village for a very reasonable price. We rashly accepted before seeing his car - a very original Toyota Crown with a clapped out engine, rust and rattles. Combine the state of the car with what must be the slowest driver in Chiang Mai and we had the recipe for a very interesting drive!

So off we chugged, leaving a trail of blue/black smoke up the tortuous mountain road, past Doi Sutep to the Meo village. Here we encountered Hill Tribe people who most certainly are NOT in their pristine state... they have obviously, and sadly, "sold out" for the tourist dollar - but at least we spied enough remnants of their untouched lives to provide us with a hint of their pre-tourist culture... their dress, their families, parts of their houses, etc. There was even a "museum", of sorts which actually didn't look all that different from their houses!

We saw lots of Opium poppies mingled amongst the flowers that the government is encouraging them to grow instead. There were numerous stalls selling all kinds of stuff... I even tried my hand at firing a crossbow. G and S did their best, once again, to contribute to their cashflow - and I had to admit that the things they bought were definitely worth it.

Back to Doi Sutep we chugged, trailing a long line of cars behind us, choking on our smoke. Up 306 steps we climbed to find ourselves in this holiest of Buddhist temples, gleaming and gold, just as it should be, in the afternoon sun. It was abuzz with activity - people praying, bowing, being blessed with holy water, clanging gongs of various sizes, throwing "fortune sticks", sticking gold foil on numerous Buddha images, chatting with monks, etc. Everywhere the atmosphere was warm and friendly... this is obviously where the people of Chiang Mai go for their Sunday afternoons! My knees complained more about going down the 306 steps than they did going up, but we were soon rattling our way back down the mountain - discovering that the condition of the brakes was just as dodgy as the rest of the car. Our driver was very friendly and in halting English he described his life in Chiang Mai (he's 51, has 7 kids and has driven all his life...).

We had a late lunch back at JJ's and discussed our plans for the remainder of the trip, resulting in us purchasing 3 plane tickets to Phitsanoluk for Tuesday. We then walked to Wat Chiang Man, Chiang Mai's oldest temple. Inside the beautiful building we not only saw a 1500 year old crystal Buddha (reputed to be the one responsible for bringing rain) and a 2400 year old marble Buddha (from India), but we met a lovely law student, Soktai, who freely, happily and in excellent English explained the intricate complexities of Buddhism to us. All very "enlightening"! Reluctantly we left him and caught a tuk-tuk to Wat Prasingh. The temple was closed but we wandered around the extensive grounds, impressed by the tall wooden repositories in which ancient, sacred texts are stored.

Then by tuk-tuk back to the hotel for a welcome half hour of R and R before our night walk to the markets (for dinner) and the bazaar (for "goodies"). While G and S shopped, I saw more of the Thai dancing... this time featuring men as well as women... with each gender dancing in a similar way. Interesting. Ten o'clock - back to JJ's for ice-cream (yum), then off to rest the weary bones.

### ***Day 34: Mon 29/1/90***

Awoke at 7. Out of the door by 8:30. Tom, our tuk-tuk driver took us first to drop off our films for developing, then we "tuk-tuked" about 25 kilometres to the Mae San Elephant Camp. Here we saw the elephants bathing attended by their "masters". We also saw them drag and stack huge logs - with incredible precision and strength - their every movement though slow and purposeful, appeared deliberate and exact. It was wonderful to witness the trust that trainer and elephant had in each other - and the almost imperceptible subtlety of the commands. Also the dexterity and sensitivity of those trunks... they could delicately pick up a dropped note and hand it to the driver... great stuff. We also saw a gibbon right next to us... but he showed no interest in our interest in him... disappointing! Oh yes, we also played "tourist" and went for a short elephant ride.

Tom and his tuk-tuk then took us back to the Mae-San waterfall - which is actually a series of beautiful cascades. Once again, Thais and foreign tourists were out in force, enjoying "Nature" in the warm sunshine - singing and picnicking amid the verdant surroundings.

Next stop, an Orchid and Butterfly farm... stunning and fascinating, both aspects... we saw the propagation and cultivation process for an amazing array of beautiful and exotic orchids... all done without a scrap of soil! We also saw butterflies at all stages in their complex life cycles... including the thrilling moments when they emerge from their chrysalis. fantastic!

Tom then took us along the Bo Sarng road... the street of factories, where we visited several craft shops and their attached retail/wholesale outlets. In order we saw:

1. Silk factory: Witnessing the entire process, from silkworm to woven material... all of it done by hand. Those women on the looms sure do earn their paltry wages with their speed and skill.
2. Silver factory: We saw from the pouring of the hot silver through beating in the designs to the finished product... slow, painstaking, hot, hard and incredibly skilled work. And to think, they sell it so cheaply!
3. Leather factory: I very nearly bought a leather jacket (for \$300!). I stood in awe watching a young guy skillfully sew a similar jacket as if it was nothing special...
4. Lacquer-work factory: Fascinating to have the intricate, painstaking process explained... and marvelous seeing the finished products.
5. Wood carving: I never cease to marvel at this skill - although here they tended to concentrate more on the carving of large pieces of furniture rather than on iconic objects, like I saw in Bali. The skill of the carver was equally apparent, however.
6. Umbrella and Fan factory: We saw every detail, from splitting the bamboo into the fine strips that eventually support every parasol, through the intricate assembly and skillful artwork. What an incredibly fiddly process - and, like the other factories we visited, so labour-intensive. But the Thais seem to take considerable pride in their work, regardless of the low wages.

At most of these places (especially the Silver factory) Steph did her best to save the local economy single-handed. We contented ourselves with a small lacquer elephant.

We were well and truly "tuk-tuked" by this time (late afternoon) so Tom returned us to the Montri where we enjoyed a quick R and R before picking up our photos. I wouldn't be at all surprised if Kodak doesn't send thank-you cards to Steph! It was a great relief to see that most of them turned out OK. A beaut Thai dinner at a local "book-recommended" restaurant, followed by our ritual ice-cream at JJ's, then a well-deserved sleep.

### ***Day 35: Tue 30/1/90***

An early (7am) start again. We paid our incredibly cheap hotel bill (\$17 per room per night!) then Tom and his trusty tuk-tuk took us to Wat Suan Dawk... a huge airy temple featuring two huge Buddhas, one sitting, the other

standing behind. Steph bought a basket of birds to set free - as is, apparently, a Buddhist custom. Tom then "tuk" us to Wat U Mong, an ancient temple complex set in large, peaceful, leafy surrounds some distance out of town. Many of the trees had notices on them, each revealing small "truths" from Buddhist philosophy. Fortunately most of them were written in both English and Thai. We sat beside the calming pond, feeding the fish. We stood quietly in front of a "starving" Buddha. Thinking. Such a restful place encourages thought and contemplation. But we had to leave. So we had our last tuk-tuk ride to the airport. We were, as usual, early. At least that gave us time to rest and catch up on our writing...

Our little plane was called a Short 330 - a Drummond Tracker - which had Glenny very worried as she observed it dwarfed by the huge runway on which it sat, looking very fragile and tiny. We flew first to Mae Sot on the border with Burma, over mountains shrouded in polluted air... there appears to be no such thing as an observable horizon here. Depressing also was the vast extent of deforestation - especially on the ridges, many of which looked completely defoliated. Many other areas looked to be clear-felled or slashed and burned. Virtually all flat areas near water were under cultivation. We saw only a few small pockets of jungle left. frightening!

From Mae Sot we headed east to Tak, on the edge of the plains... we flew close to the giant lakes which feed many of the rivers which eventually find their way to Bangkok. On this leg, although the flight was very smooth, Steph felt quite sick, reminding me of the many "green" flight I have had... I empathised with her.

From Tak we flew to Pitsanaluk, where we landed at 4:30pm. Most of this leg was over flat country only occasionally interrupted by a mountain range or two. Everything was so shrouded in haze making it difficult to see the ground only 6-8,000 feet below.

Our first-choice hotel was full so they sent us to another, the Rajapurk where we got a room for 500B - but only for one night... we have to transfer back tomorrow. Checking-in completed, we decided to make use of the fading light to do our "orienting" walk. Down on the Nan River we saw the houseboats which apparently exist nowhere else in Thailand. We wandered through the myriad streets where very little is written in English and where very few people speak anything other than Thai. We quickly came to understand what it is like to be illiterate! We eventually found a restaurant for dinner. No-one there spoke or understood English so we had to resort to complex and hilarious charades to order. Eventually we managed to order something... and enjoyed a No 60, a No 39, followed by a delicious No 72. Yummy! A half hour walk found us back at our hotel where we arranged for a "taxi-tour" tomorrow and rewarded ourselves for today's efforts with three banana splits. Steph's rumbly tummy obviously now feels better!

### **Day 36: Wed 31/1/90**

After breakfasting and packing, we left our bags to be transferred to the Amarin Hotel and departed in our taxi at exactly 8:30. We drove for nearly an hour on a dead-straight, flat road through, you guessed it - rice fields. Once again there was no horizon. Visibility was only one or two kilometres, max. The smoke haze is as constant as it is depressing. Compared to Egypt, few animals are used here... for transport or cartage. Here they mainly seem to use bicycles, trishaws (and their numerous variants), two-wheeled tractors (which pull ploughs, carts and just about anything else that can be moved), and a simple sort of truck which runs on the tractor motor attached to a simple box chassis. Rural life moves slowly here.

Our driver, who spoke no English, let Steph and me cash a couple more cheques in Sukhothai... a process which took nearly 20 minutes due to the red tape and voluminous forms required, which make our banks back home look like models of efficiency! This task completed we drove on to the following:

1. The Ramkhamhaeng national Museum: excellent displays of relics, maps, photographs, etc. from the area. Well presented and grouped... but no 3D model!
2. Wat Mahathat: Near the Museum, inside the ancient walls. Huge, old and decayed. Mostly made of bricks, originally covered with stucco. Some Buddha images, small and very large, lay within. Some of these are still obviously worshipped, draped in bright yellow cloth and with offerings at their feet.
3. Wat Srisawai: A 12th Century shrine with 3 corncob-like "prangs" clearly indicating the Hindu influence on the Khmers.
4. Wat Sra Sri: On an island in the middle of a large pond. Concealing a beautifully curvaceous black, bronze "walking Buddha".
5. Wat Sri Chum: Impressive. As we approached we glimpsed a huge (11 metre) Buddha as if through a gigantic keyhole. He is sitting serenely inside a square-based structure with 3 tall walls, just large enough to house him. We stood in awe at this sight for quite some time. Like I said... impressive.
6. Wat Saphan Hin: On the top of a 200 metre hill, from where you could see Old Sukhothai if only the thick haze would allow. We climbed in the midday heat up to the remnants of an ancient slate path and collapsed in Buddha's shade, welcoming the slightly cooler breeze.

7. Wat Aranyk: There is very little left of this once gigantic, ancient complex, set in a forest. You could see the remains of the stark huts where the monks used to meditate.

8. Wat Sorasan: a single stupa, implausably held aloft by several white elephants.

9. Wat Phra Pai Luang: Similar to Srisawai, only bigger. A former Hindu shrine, we found the remains of several large Buddhas, one of which was reclining. Impressive to see the extent of 8 centuries of decay.

Even with the air-conditioned rides between ruins, the heat was quite oppressive, so we all agreed to call it a day around 2:30, seeking refuge in the peace and quiet of a "pond-side" restaurant. After a beaut lunch we drove back to Phitsaluloke and checked into the Amarin Hotel, closely followed by our transferred luggage (Whew!).

The manager was super-helpful, aiding us in getting bus tickets and booking a hotel in Ayuthaya for tomorrow. After a little R and R we retreated to the hotel's cafe for ice-cream, then ventured back along the river to wat Phra Sri Ratna Mahathat. There is some crazy festival being held around the temple today and we soon found ourselves immersed in a cacophony of blaring speakers, each screeching out its incomprehensible message or music. Add to this maelstrom of sound a multitude of people, stalls and general hubbub and our already-weary senses were soon overwhelmed. On the way to this scene of raucous chaos we stopped to watch a game akin to volleyball, but with a rattan ball (about 8" diameter), and a rule that forbids you to use your hands! What skill and coordination those boys had as they held the ball aloft using only their feet. I wisely rejected their not-so-serious invitation to join them in their game. I know when I'm about to make a complete fool of myself!

We eventually got to see the temple, inside of which was the most beautiful and famous Buddha we've yet seen. Although bronze, he was covered in gold and brightly lit, surrounded by a fiery gold "halo", adding dramatically to the overall effect. We stood (and sat), stunned by the awesomeness of this vision. It seemed almost sacrilegious to photograph it, but we did, nonetheless, aware that our photos could not possibly convey the power of it all. The temple itself was impressive... black with gold stars on the columns and brilliantly alive paintings from various Buddhist mythologies adorning the walls.

Inspired by this sight, we sat watching the people bathe, fully clothed, in the filthy river. We then wandered back to the hotel for a terrific Chinese nosh. We even watched the first third of the movie *Crocodile Dundee II*, dubbed into Thai. Luckily I had seen it before so I could explain to G and S what was happening, otherwise they'd be completely lost. Interestingly, "G'day" doesn't

appear to need translation into Thai! We eventually staggered into our room to write, chat and, above all, to sleep. Quite a day, this one.

### **Day 37: Thu 1/2/90**

We all agree that we will ceremoniously destroy that damned alarm clock at the end of this trip! Another early start. Another cold shower. Thinking that there was only one bus station in Pitsanoluk, we asked to be dropped there by the hotel's taxi... which he duly did. The trouble was, we weren't supposed to board the bus here, we were supposed to wait for it just up the road from the hotel! Fortunately, the actual bus does originate at the bus station and was prevented from departing by a very helpful gent with the three of us "innocents" in tow. So on we hopped, with the bus driver emphatically telling us "No, you can't get off at Ayutaya". We soon discovered, however, that he was only saying this while within earshot of the bus inspector. Apparently it's against the rules. By letting us on he obviously intended to break the rule - or so we hoped!

This was no ordinary bus trip, this... we had a "hostess" who spent most of the trip doling out food and drink. pretty good, huh? Needless to say, the haze was still as thick as ever as we passed by mile after mile of flat rice fields. The major activities here seem to be blocking the streets with 2-wheeled tractors laden with hyacinth weed extracted from ponds where people fished for who-knows-what. At least we had the Walkman for entertainment!

Four hours later we arrived at the Ayutaya checkpoint. One minute later - and 200 yards down the road - we were let off in the middle of the highway. We caught an expansive (50B) tuk-tuk to the U-Thong Inn on the outskirts of town. Checked-in, we luxuriated in our air-conditioned room for a short time and caught up on some much-needed washing. We then headed for town aboard another (cheaper) tuk-tuk. The heat may have slowed down our walking speed, but not our ambitions... We walked along the waterfront searching in vain for something, preferably in English, that would tell us where and how we could buy a boat ticket for Bangkok. Our fruitless wanderings eventually took us to the Museum where we met a tuk-tuk driver who spoke pretty good English. After a bit of a conversation we agreed to have him drive us to "places of interest" at 9:30 tomorrow. He also was able to help us with the boat to Bangkok.

Ayutaya is a sprawling town, surrounded by a huge moat formed at the confluence of two major rivers. Its past glories can be glimpsed in every direction - even from our hotel room which look out upon two ancient chedis. Its present condition in no way reflects this glorious history... it looks just like any other country town, albeit covering a huge area. On we walked through the heat and dust, encountering little of interest until we finally gave up and

caught a tuk-tuk back to the coolth of the hotel... where we rewarded ourselves with very welcome ice-cream sundaes!

We filled the gap between afternoon tea and dinner with an interesting conversation about belief, psychiatry, ecological catastrophe, etc, in the darkening cool of our room. We splurged on dinner at the hotel, entertained by a series of "professional singers" singing in a number of different languages. It was great fun joining in. Then, up to our room for the usual day's writing and, eventually, sleep.

### **Day 38: Fri 2/2/90**

No hot water. Again! After another "American Breakfast", Sawat (our tuk-tuk driver picked us up as arranged. Off we went on our own private "grand tour"...

1. Wat Yai Chai Mongkol: a huge site, well restored with lawns and paths surrounding the ruins. many of the Chedi and Buddha images have been fully restored - including a mysterious group of "Buddhas" apparently worshipping a larger Buddha, and an even larger reclining Buddha contemplatively peering out from within the collapsed walls of the wiharn. This wat is still being used as a retreat for monks, many of whom we saw going about their tasks. We also encountered several Buddhist nuns. We climbed half-way up the main chedi, inside of which was a deep well, a beautiful wooden roof and several golden Buddhas. There was also a number of bats, chirping away in the gloom.
2. Wat Banan Cheong: Talk about "atmosphere"! Inside this wat was a huge (19 metres) sitting Buddha... very old and very serene. Enveloping us was the smoke and smell of incense as throngs of worshippers went about their business. The pillars and roof were darkened and brown with centuries of smoke, and through the almost impenetrable haze gleamed 84,000 small Buddhas, each in its own little alcove in the walls. To add to this atmosphere a lone old gamelan player beat out his haunting melodies in one corner of the immense room. Spine tingling! As we were leaving four very polite schoolgirls hesitantly introduced themselves to us after obviously discussing the pros and cons of doing so - amid much giggling.
3. Wat Mahatat: Very much in ruins. Spread over a large area. Probably the most impressive of them all in its heyday. There was one huge chedi in the middle. All of the Buddhas there had been decapitated (or totally destroyed) by the Burmese in the 18th Century war (when most of the temples were burnt or destroyed). One of the Buddha's heads stares out from the roots of a large fig tree. Truly awesome.

4. Wat Praram: A huge "corn-cob" chedi in the Khmer style... with a Garuda or two on the Chedi to show the obvious Hindu influence. I climbed half-way up an encircled the Chedi, admiring the detail of the extensive carvings.

5. Viharn Pra Mongkol Bopitt: This is the main viharn attached to the Royal Palace. The viharn itself is quite new, but the Buddha inside is very old - rescued from the nearby ruins. It is black, bronze, and lacked a right arm when found. The arm has since been restored, but the dark, almost sinister look still remains. Spooky!

6. The Old Royal Palace: A huge site, mostly in ruins courtesy of the Burmese in 1767. In the centre of the ruined columns stand three huge chedis in the "typical" Thai style. Each was built over the ashes of a king. here we re-met the four giggly 15 year-old schoolgirls who were very keen to try out their English with us - and to hear us sing! We all had a fun time sitting in the shade of an ancient fig tree chatting, laughing - and singing!

7. Wat Lokya Suthwad: Another huge reclining Buddha - resting contentedly on a cushion of lotus flowers. The original viharn which once enclosed him is now little more than rubble, leaving him exposed to the elements. he doesn't seem to mind, though. He also has been recently fully restored.

8. Wat Kasattra Thiraj: On the other side of the river. Brilliant shiny golds, greens, blues, yellows and reds detailed the ornamentation around the viharn, mimicked by small pagodas flanking it, carrying its impressive reflection to the river. We were not allowed inside. behind this contemporary viharn was an ancient chedi, the orange brick and grey stucco contrasting marvelously with the gilded temple.

9. Phu Khao Thong: A large, white, lonesome chedi, the top half typically Burmese, the bottom half Thai. Here we encountered the four schoolgirls once more who happily accompanied us up the stairs to the mid-level platform. We crept into a narrow, low tunnel to where workmen were repairing a couple of Buddhas by the feeble light of a single oil lamp. The unexpected chirping of bats in the darkness heralded a hasty retreat by the schoolgirls!

10. Elephant Kraal: With the four girls now firmly attached to us, we drove to where once in the blue moon 84 elephants are herded into the Kraal to be lassood, trained and then chosen by the king. he did this, apparently, only last week! Quite impressive to see the design of walls strong enough to keep 84 elephants in!

11. Wat Na Phra Meru: Sawatt said he was saving this one for last... and now I know why! It was the only large Wat to have escaped the ravages of the Burmese, so it gives us a good idea of what the others must have looked like

in their days of glory. Outside, the eaves and doorways glistened in their gold-encrusted surrounds. Inside was a beautiful gold Buddha, seated beneath an intricately carved wooden ceiling held aloft by massive hexagonal pillars and gigantic wooden beams. Urged on by the giggly girls, I sat at Buddha's feet and threw "fortune sticks"... and out popped the number "13" which, when the Thai inscription was haltingly translated for me, spelt "a good and a happy life". What a surprise!

In the small temple beside the viharn was a 1,000 year old stone Buddha from Sri Lanka, sitting on a chair, legs apart, hands on knees. At his feet, on the sunken floor, were four men, one sleeping, one recently awoken (by us, no doubt), and one massaging the other - who looked like he was well into his dotage. Looking at the paraphernalia littered around it was obvious that they were living here.

With the incessant heat once more causing us to slow somewhat, six hours had been consumed with this enlightening journey, so we got Sawatt to drive us back to the hotel where we bid farewell to him, and to the four girls, with whom we exchanged addresses. If you were to generalise from these examples of Thais, you would conclude that they are friendly, good humoured, generous, inquisitive and honest people... and a pleasure to be with.

The remainder of the evening was spent writing, reading, eating ice-cream and trying to book a room in Bangkok for tomorrow. After an expensive (but very good) Thai meal and a little more reading we fell asleep to the somehow reassuring sounds of our resident gecko crunching contentedly on his insect dinner.

### **Day 39: Sat 3/2/90**

Early start, cold shower, "American Breakfast". Sawatt picked us up at 8:30 and tuk-tuked us to the river where he explained to the long-boat owner that we wished to go to Bang Pa In in order to see the Palace and to catch the 1pm boat to Bangkok. Saying farewell to Sawatt, we boarded the boat and headed south through the murky water dotted with various-sized islands of water hyacinth.

During the 20 kilometre, 90 minute trip we passed houses on stilts, wats of all shapes and sizes, thick vegetation, huge barges, houseboats of every description (and state of repair!), floating factories dredging the sands beneath the river, and a myriad examples of different ways to live by the river... Including the ceaseless washing of clothes and clothed people.

Our "driver" dropped us off at the Palace entrance (Wehat Chamrun Palace) and we followed the arrows... past a lake full of huge fish, surrounding a

picturesque little pavilion, through a wonderful Chinese-style house, over bridges lined with incongruous statues inspired by Greek, Roman and, of all things, Bavarian design. There was also a wonderful green-striped, pink roofed house that looked very "un-Thai". We sat for a while, soaking up the serenity before retrieving our bags and searching for a taxi (or whatever) to take us to the boat.

Eventually a trishaw and a motorised trishaw arrived, but a "communication breakdown" led to them taking us to the bus station instead! Never mind, it's only 60 kilometres to Bangkok and we've had our river trip anyway. So onto the non-air-conditioned bus we staggered... it was like being in a sauna until it got moving, creating a desperately needed air-flow. The feeble fan over our seats a) had no power, b) was broken anyway and c) had only one blade left!

We began to smell the polluted Bangkok air when still 20 kilometres away... and the rapidly increasing traffic congestion told us we were nearing a very large city. Ninety minutes later we alighted into the chaos and heat of the Northern Bus Station. After a little animated haggling we caught an "illegal" taxi to the Miami Hotel... a trip that took nearly as long and was definitely hotter than the bus trip!

The amusingly named, geographically hopeful, Miami Hotel is right in the heart of the tourist hotel area... and to our delight sports a swimming pool! The surrounding streets and lanes which, of course, we investigated as soon as we'd recovered our composure, were lined with stalls selling everything from fake Cartier watches to temple rubbings. We enjoyed just looking but couldn't resist a few items of very cheap clothing. The heat once more drove us back to our hotel where we retreated to the cool waters of their pool... which was so chlorinated that you could almost feel it crystallising on your body as soon as you got out.

Thus refreshed we showered the excess chlorine off and made our way to the Ambassador's Food Centre where we pigged out on terrific, cheap food. We spent some time admiring the small zoo of birds, fish and a mammal or two attached to the Ambassador. The Australian parrots made us feel somewhat homesick. Back to our wonderfully cool hotel room for a quiet evening of reading and writing... and even a little television! Then a quiet (earplugged) sleep.

### ***Day 40: Sun 4/2/90***

Slept in, at last! Lugged our bulging luggage across to the Federal Hotel, then caught the crowded local bus to Wat Po (for 2B, about 10cents) where we joined the touristic hordes weaving their weary ways around the temple grounds. It felt just like Egypt again! This is a spectacular temple complex, with lots of smaller wiharns, pavilions, etc surrounding the gigantic wiharn

inside of which is a humungous reclining Buddha - so big it is impossible to see all of him in one view. The soles of his feet alone are huge... with inlaid mother-of-pearl defining the 108 characteristics of Buddha.

Each of the other temples surrounding this one would have been spectacular on its own. They were linked by a series of covered walkways in which were "avenues" of gilt Buddhas, each one worthy of photographing!

From here we slithered through the oppressive Bangkok heat to the Grand Palace and the attached Wat Phra Keo... the Royal Wat. Everything we had seen up until now pales beside the grandeur and shimmer of this magnificent place. At its entrance we met a teacher with two boys who wished to practice their English. We obliged for a while. After, we met another student (of tourism) who volunteered to show us through the site just so he could perfect his English. He was very nervous as he was recording the whole interaction, no doubt for an assignment. His English was difficult to understand - and he had considerable difficulty with our awful accents, but he tried very hard and managed to enlighten us on a few things nonetheless.

For our \$5 entry fee we at least received a very colourful brochure, saving us trying to remember everything! Suffice to say that the sheer opulence and mixture of styles, old and new, impressed us greatly.

We caught a cab back to the Siam Centre (stopping at the Government Store on the way) where we were told that there was a food centre. We soon discovered that the food centre had long ago departed from there, so we decided to walk back to the Ambassador, having been told that it was "only a kilometre or so". Once again, our informant was wrong... it was much more like 4 kilometres which, in the sweltering Bangkok heat felt more like forty!

However, the fact that I am writing this confirms that we made it - just. We dived gratefully into our ice-creams and iced drinks as reward for our persistence - or was it stupidity? Back to the Federal to write, wash and read, then dinner at the Ambassador, then bed...

### ***Day 41: Mon 5/2/90***

Only one day left!!

A lazy start to the day. After dropping off more films to be developed, we hired a tuk-tuk for the morning... very cheap, as long as he could take us to a few "Government Stores" and we spent 10 minutes or so at each - Apparently drivers who take foreigners to these stores receive vouchers for petrol. So, after the first store we went to Jim Thompson's house, an interesting, atmospheric place built and decorated by one of Bangkok's most colourful characters. We tagged along with a group of tourists taking an English

Language tour which proved to be surprisingly enlightening. Thai houses, for example, have inward sloping walls, doors, windows, furniture, etc.

Then to another Government Store. Then on to Wat Benjamalopitr... a large wat built of marble, housing a replica of the Pitsanoluk Buddha, but somehow not quite as breathtaking as the original. What was interesting, however, were the rows of statues representing Buddha in many different poses (subduing Mara, teaching, requesting peace, etc. ) and in many styles (Japanese, Burmese, Ayuttya, etc.).

Yet one more bloody Government Store, then across the river to where the King's barges are kept. We had to walk for 500 metres or so through waterlogged backyards reeking of putrid, stagnant water to get to the huge shed where the Royal Barges are stored just above the water... an somewhat incongruous setting, we thought, but then realised that most tourists arrive and leave by water. The barges are actually long, sleek craft powered by up to 50 paddlers. Their intricate and exotic carvings looked a little worse for wear but then some of them were over 100 years old!

We then hired a long-tail boat to journey downriver to the landing near the Oriental Hotel... and what a journey it was! We were doing well in excess of 20 - 25 knots with a huge rooster tail, prop wash and spray making it look and feel much faster. Quite exhilarating. we saw a few temples through the spray, including the beautiful Temple of Dawn. We also saw the usual riverside sights - people washing, barges floating high when towed upstream but with mere inches of freeboard when going downstream fully laden. We dodged the other water taxis zipping all over the place and boats all jockeying for position at the numerous piers... quite a busy little river, this one!

Our attempt to get into the Oriental for lunch was thwarted mainly because the "guard" at the door didn't consider my shorts to be "acceptable". Huh! So we tuk-tuked back to the Ambassador for lunch and ice-cream - somehow managing to avoid being taken to a Government Store on the way. We picked up our pictures (success!) and spent the rest of the evening reading, writing and just relaxing in our air-conditioned room. Dinner at the Ambassador (again) where I enticed the waiter into bringing us rotis with bananas and ice cream. Bliss.

### **Day 42: Tue 5/2/90**

Awoke, had "hotcakes" for brecky, then caught a cab to the Museum. The driver cleverly drove about three times the "straight-line" distance to avoid the horrendous traffic snarls... but his noble efforts were in vain because for some inexplicable reason the Museum was closed. So we crossed the multi-lane traffic jam to the National Gallery. It also was closed, despite the

prominent OPEN sign outside. The only thing that was open was an exhibition of artwork by Henry Moore which actually proved to be quite interesting, but not exactly what we had come to Thailand to see.

So we re-crossed the road and attempted to decipher the map to find Wat Mahatat... which we eventually did with the help of a very kind soul who volunteered his services and showed us around - this also being closed! This wat is really a monastery-come-Buddhist University. There were no other tourists around (hurrah!). We saw the elaborate altar under which is said to be Buddha's breastbone. We saw over 150 gold Buddha statues in the numerous galleries surrounding the central Wat. We saw some of the 2,000 or so resident monks asleep on the tiled floor or meditating in secluded little alcoves. We saw images (photos and/or statues) of past abbots. All-in-all very interesting and peaceful... and to think this is all right in the middle of throbbing, dirty, noisy Bangkok!

As we entered the temple's grounds we passed a bustling open-air market. As we left we passed dozens of people peddling small Buddha/Abbot/Monk images which Thais find to be extremely holy and, therefore, valuable. It was obviously a very serious business, with buyers examining each icon with a magnifying glass!

We decided to walk the 5 or 6 kilometres to the Vimanmek Mansion... to which we had already bought entry tickets which confidently assured us that it, at least, was open. The day was not quite as stiflingly hot as yesterday and the footpaths were wider, less hazardous and less populated, so the walking was almost enjoyable.

We eventually arrived - with little help from the indecipherable, ambiguous map - and had 15 minutes to regain our strength (and body fluids) before the English-speaking tour at 1:15. This completely unexpected tour proved to be a highlight of the whole trip. The mansion itself was fabulous, consuming a large chunk of my last reel of film, and we were shown its every detail by a beautiful, cheerful, well-informed, sensitive Thai lady whose delight in her job was obvious. She showed us through 30 rooms, each housing gifts, furniture, photos and nic-nacs from King Rama IV's extensive collections. terrific. Following this wonderful experience we shared a taxi with an American woman who was staying in the Ambassador Apartments near our hotel. We introduced her to the delights of the Ambassador Food Centre where we all had lunch.

Duly satisfied - both gastronomically and tourist-wise - Glenny and I decided not to waste the hotel pool and spent the remainder of the afternoon wallowing in the cool, clear waters. Sheer bliss. Steph decided to stay in the room, chuckling sporadically and uncontrollably at the latest book - "Wilt".

We all spent the rest of the evening in the room, winding down in preparation for our early departure for home tomorrow.

***Day 42: Tue 5/2/90***

After 6 weeks of exposure to two very different worlds - Egypt and South East Asia - we were so glad to be heading back to the familiarity and comfort of home. We caught an early flight out of Bangkok and were soon wending our way through Sydney's very ordered and quiet traffic to our house in Warriewood. We were, at last, home.

## **Bali Revisited**

Click [HERE](#) for photos.

*In 1994 I returned to my beloved Bali -with Glenys... just as I had promised myself all those years ago.*

*I returned with considerable trepidation, however, knowing full well that I would be unlikely to rediscover the Bali I remembered so fondly from nearly 20 years earlier. On that first trip I could see the ominous signs of pending change so clearly... and I was concerned that most of these changes would inexorably drag Bali away from the very things that had proved so enticing to me. I was also aware that I was nearly 20 years older and I wondered whether the magic would still appear so magical without the filters of naiveté and youth that so embellished my observations on that first trip.*

*As in all my travels, I kept a diary of that 1994 trip. I reproduce it here as a record of the changes I saw in Bali, and of the changes that had inevitably occurred in myself...*

### **Day 1: Sat 18/6/94**

With our dog Sam packed off to the "doggie hotel" yesterday, the house secured as best we can and arrangements made to feed the fish and water the plants, our neighbour, Petar, drove us through the early morning light to Mascot Airport. We're catching the 8:45am Jumbo to Bali!

One "Maccas" breakfast, one Qantas "brunch", a movie we'd seen before (*Four Weddings and a Funeral*), a *Mr Bean* we hadn't, and several thousand kilometres of barren, multicoloured landscape later and we land at Denpasar. No walking across a simmering tarmac this time, though. No, "civilisation" appears to have come at least to Bali's airport! We wait for over an hour in the Imigrasi queue, along with hundreds of other intrepid "foreigners".

Outside the air-conditioned airport the temperature is not as high as I remember it, but the way in which we are descended upon by "helpful" locals is JUST how I remember it. Miraculously, the "Bali Island Tours" people find us, wresting our bags from our nervous grasp. A short ride later - in an "air-conditioned" car which seemed to get hotter whenever the air-conditioner kicked in - and we alight at Alit's... Alit's Beach Bungalows, that is, at the northern end of Sanur Beach.

After the compulsory welcome drink and chat with a "long-term", ever so slightly hung over, resident ("... been here three bloody days...") we wend our way to our bungalow (No 82). Trying to rearrange the two single beds into a

more connubial double bed succeeds only in rearranging the dodgy wiring, causing one half of the two already-feeble reading lights to expire. At least the air-conditioning still works.

After the inevitable testing of every light switch, cupboard door and tap in the room, we opt for the compulsory orientation tour... firstly around the grounds of Alits, then south towards the heart of Sanur. Alits consists of a number of small bungalows, laid out in a haphazard array amid winding, tree-covered walkways. The loudest sounds are the birds chattering... at least, that is the case when you turn the air-conditioner off! Having eyed the pool, spa and restaurant we head off into the heat of the afternoon, blithely ignoring the impassioned pleas of the bemo drivers, and swelter our way down the road to Sanur Beach... huh, we showed those pesky bemo drivers... we saved ourselves 20c by walking for half an hour in the shimmering heat!

The cooling sea-breeze made the beach very pleasant... a comfortable feeling barely eroded by the insistent attentions of the omnipresent hawkers. At least they seem to have retained their sense of humour when their insistence is met by our obvious lack of interest in their wares.

Finding nowhere particularly inviting to eat, we walked back along the beach to relax a while in our dimly-lit little bungalow before venturing off for our "complimentary" dinner... set in a sunken little amphitheatre, adjacent to a stage apparently made of stone, right in the middle of Alits. The 'as advertised' 10-course meal consisted of a slow progression of tidbits brought to our table as we were entertained by, first, a solo flute player, next a small orchestra of percussion and jaw-harps, and ultimately by an energetic presentation of the "Frog Dance". the strange, evocative croaking music that accompanied the appearance of the "leading frog" stayed with me into my dreams that night!

Interesting though this all was, I couldn't help but pine for the Bali dances I saw 20 years ago. This all seemed a little amateurish, unspontaneous and obviously intended to entertain the handful of guests... half of whom appeared to think that the little spectacle merely competed for their own attentions as they attempted to noisily impress other travelers at their table.

Nevertheless, the display brought back memories long filed away... of beautiful young Balinese girls, majestically contorting fingers, toes and limbs, eyes darting meaningfully in response to the hypnotic repetition of the accompanying orchestra.

With "jet-lag" rapidly descending on our reverie, we crashed into our separate beds, lulled to sleep by the clattering of our air-conditioner.

## **Day 2: Sun 19/6/94**

With our brains still adjusting to the 2-hour time difference, we both awoke early. Lucky we did, because it took an eternity for the hot water to find its way through what must be a tortuous maze of pipes to our taps. Once showered (no plastic buckets and concrete tubs here!) we devoured our "complimentary American breakfast" and finalised our bold - and probably foolish - plan to hire a car. A hundred yards up the road we discover a Suzuki Jimny for 40,000Rp a day (about \$26). We haggle a little over insurance, change a few hundred dollars then off we go... to join in the madness that is Balinese traffic.

With no map, it gets tricky very soon... but hey, "it's only a small island. We'll eventually reach an edge and then we'll know where we are!" Wrong. Of course, we get lost. Several times. The main road rule here appears to be "Avoid everything, if possible". How you avoid things is of no real concern to everyone else.

Quite a few wrong turns later we find ourselves climbing up to Ulu Watu, on the southern tip of the island. Past the opulence of the Nusa Dua resorts. Past the poverty of the corrugated iron shacks. Down pot-holed laneways barely wide enough for our little car, let alone for the overladen lorries coming the other way! At least we managed one overtaking manoeuvre... but given that it turned out to be merely a pushbike buried beneath a mountain of mops, buckets and brooms, my inferiority complex remained intact!

We arrive at Ulu Watu and are immediately ripped off for a parking fee, amid dire warnings of being ravaged by hordes of avenging monkeys... and the inevitable offers of ("cheap") protective guidance. Having run the gauntlet of vendors and having purchased the necessary sarong and sashes, we enter the 9th century temple. Set on one of the most stunningly beautiful sites in Bali, Ulu Watu perches atop a sheer limestone cliff overlooking some of the best surf in the world crashing below.

Of course the monkeys (all six of them) were just too bored with us to cause us any anguish. Disappointingly, there were no festivities going on... the place was all but deserted. But it nevertheless gave us some hint of its majestic power through its sheer age and its craggy location.

Having navigated our way semi-successfully to the Temple we thought that it would be a relatively task finding our way back home again. Wrong! "Turn here!" shouts Glenys as she assures me that she recognises the Kentucky Fried Chicken sign. Wrong, again! "Pull over there", orders the policeman who informs me that it was illegal to be in that particular lane... but, of course, can't explain why. "You can fix it with 20,000Rp now, or I can give you a ticket and you can go to Court in Denpasar. A token argument later, where I'm sure I saw him anxiously finger that enormous gun by his side, and he

leaves 20,000Rp richer and we skulk off 20,000Rp poorer... and we still have no idea where we are!

Undaunted (well, perhaps a little daunted), we zig and we zag searching for our little Alit's haven at Sanur. We find the main road to Denpasar instead... at least I was able to recognise parts of it from 20 years ago. If the traffic was mad then, it's even madder now! Miraculously we find a petrol station and some helpful directions... in the form of a "map" which inexplicably displays Kuta, Bali, Denpasar, Sanur and the human alimentary canal. Establishing that we were thankfully nowhere near the duodenum, we headed two kilometres up the road we were on to (you guessed it) Sanur!

A celebratory lunch of chicken and vegies, washed down with a very long, cool drink, followed by a calming soak in the pool had us soon feeling a little more relaxed. However, with neither of us remembering how to relax for so long we decide to cruise the length of Sanur. As if the traffic wasn't enough to worry about, the little Suzi's brakes began behaving very strangely. Fortunately we were able to stop, so we walked for a while, checking out the numerous shops. It always remains a mystery to me how all these shops can survive when they all seem to sell the same stuff!

Oh well, back to Alit's where we manage to sit still for all of two or three seconds before we decide to walk the beach again. The observation that our little dead-end street was chockers with buses, bikes, cars, people, dogs, etc, should have alerted us to the fact that on Sunday afternoons the whole of Bali decides to congregate at Sanur to enjoy the sun, sand and... well, the sun and sand seems to be enough. Hundreds of people, intent on enjoying themselves, cram the long beach, creating a warm, lively atmosphere just inviting us to join in.

We ambled slowly southward, marveling at the skill of the kite fliers, the size of the kites, the impressive parading of the young, the impeccable behaviour of the numerous children with their mums bathing fully clothed nearby.

We buy a couple of T-Shirts and a vest from two very insistent young girls who managed to make the whole bargaining process so much fun that you almost forgot that perhaps you were being subtly ripped off. We witnessed an hilarious tug-of-war between two sweaty teams of muscly young men... each with its own throng of enthusiastic supporters noisily egging them on. The winning throng erupted with joy as soon as victory was declared, but as was the "Bali way" 20 years ago, they dispersed rapidly as soon as it was over.

Back along the beach to Alit's for R and R (rest and 'rite) then to "Agung and Sue's Watering Hole" for chicken curry, pancakes and ice-cream! We also managed to change rooms to a much better one, with a double bed and a light that works.

### **Day 3: Mon 20/6/94**

At 9am, after another free "American breakfast" of runny boiled eggs and bread, we head north, intending to follow Bali's eastern shores. We had driven only about three kilometres when, while stopped at an intersection we are startled by a tap on the car's window... "hello, where you from?... ahh... Where you go?... What program have you today?" A young man on a motorbike is obviously trying to interest us in something, but what? "Ahh... you go to Batubulan? Come see Barong Dance! It begins at 9:30..."

So we follow his smelly little motorbike to Batubulan where his friends direct us where to park, we buy a ticket and he clears the way through the audience which is already intently watching the performance. We sit on the front step... virtually on the stage. The audience sits on three sides, mostly in the shade. The stage is in bright sunlight. A full gamelan orchestra belts out its intoxicating rhythms off to one side. Glenys and I appear to be the only "Europeans" in the audience.

The five-act play was in Balinese so much of the dialogue was lost on us, but the "sight-gags" and overall "good-vs-evil" theme were pretty obvious - as were the very risqué gags (like playing with the erect penis of one of the vanquished characters as if it were a flute!). The audience, ourselves included, roared with laughter, hissed the villains and cheered on the good guys.

Of course there was Rando and the Barong and Hanoman the Monkey King... all very enjoyable and great fun. As it was 20 years ago, when the play finished there was no applause and the actors, orchestra and audience just dissipated. Very strange.

Farewelling a disappointed young man ("I just want to try out my English... I not sell you anything...") we turn northwards once more. I'm getting a little more used to the traffic now - feeling more relaxed. We still see some examples of downright crazy driving, though, especially the overtaking. Undeterred, we potter along at 40 to 60 kilometres per hour, often with fully laden lorries mere inches from our rear bumper.

On through Celuk, Sukawati, Batuan, Blahbatuh, Gianyah, Klungkung and Candi Dasa. Having traveled this same route 20 years ago I can't help myself but make a few comparisons:

\* The road is MUCH improved - wider, signs, white lines, etc.

\*All of the old, rickety suspension bridges have been replaced... though some still remain in place beside the new ones, reminders of that bygone era.

\* the previously open drains are now mostly covered by footpaths.

\* The whole journey now is like traveling through one long sinuous village. Gone are the acres of fields and/or forests that used to separate what were once discrete villages.

\* Gianyar, in particular, looked quite prosperous, and even the other villages and towns looked cleaner and not as poor as I remember them to be. And where are all the chickens, pigs, ducks, dogs, etc, that used to amble unconcernedly onto the roads, tempting fate and the lives of unwary motorcyclists as they dodged the traffic?

I recognise just enough of the sights to cause Glenys to exclaim: " If I hear you say 'seen that before' or 'I've drawn that' or ' when I was last here...' I'll scream!!!"

OK, OK, I got the message.

Stopping occasionally to take the odd photo delays our progress only slightly. Getting a little lost in Amlapura loses us 15 minutes... but since this is Bali (where time is very "rubbery"), who's counting? Eventually we find the place we've driven all this way to see... the remains of the Ujung Water Palace.

Now it has changed in 20 years, courtesy of a couple of earthquakes. Still, squinting our eyes and letting our imaginations wander, we get some idea of its past glory... acres of pagodas, stages, stairways and arches set amidst a series of tranquil lakes, lying at the very foot of Agung and stretching to the ocean. It must have been quite a sight in its time!

It's now 12:30, so we decide to turn south, back the way we came. We lunch in a little restaurant in Candi Dasa, a newly "discovered" tourist area set beside what was once a beautiful beach at the foot of the mighty Agung. So where has the beach gone?, you may well ask. It's a classic story of human stupidity... the hotels were to be built so tourist would come and enjoy the beach. The builders needed cement so they trashed the nearby coral reef to extract the lime. With the protective reef now gone the waves washed away the beach. So now they wonder why the tourists don't come. Stupid, huh?

At least the competition for the almighty tourist dollar means we get a good, cheap lunch! Refreshed, we head south once more, stopping at Goa Lahweh... the bat cave. As soon as our car doors are opened we are "adopted" by two little girls who "gave" us each a necklace, and pointed us in the direction of the Temple's entrance, naturally hinting strongly that we purchase their postcards before we leave.

As soon as I saw the temple I remembered it from my last visit here, when I ventured deep inside with nothing more than the rapidly fading light from a rusty torch to guide me. This time, none of that foolishness. We take the compulsory photos of the bats and shrines and are besieged by a small army of school girls from Borneo... all anxious to take pictures of themselves with US! Much to Glenny's embarrassment we have a number of these photos taken... we thought they would never let us escape.

Our reprieve from the photographic insistence of the Borneoese schoolgirls was short-lived... remember the two girls with their postcards? A little hilarious bartering later finds us 5,000Rp poorer and the proud owners of 12 postcards. With the dubious pleasure of once more unwittingly contributing to Bali's economy, we head again southwards.

At Klungkung we spy a small parade ambling along behind a gamelan orchestra - probably off to scatter ashes in the nearby river. By the time we find somewhere to park and join them it appears to be all over! So we decide to visit the Kertha Goss (the Hall of Justice). It was here that justice was dished out to murderers, traitors, etc, until the late 1950's. As if to remind evildoers of their eventual fate, the roof is adorned with well-maintained depictions of the cruel punishments that could be meted out by demons in the afterlife. Amid all this burning of genitals, disembowelings, beheadings and boiling in oil we once again encounter the Borneo schoolgirls... who proceed to insist on yet another series of photographs where we seem destined to end up in the photo albums of families we have never met and who have no idea who we are. I wonder how many photos of us there are adorning family photo albums all over the world? Strange.

Back to Sanur, to luxuriate in the spa with a long, cool orange juice as, cooled by the gentle sea-breeze, we celebrate another day of survival on the treacherous byways of Bali.

A little more "R and R" then to Agus and Sue's Watering Hole for dinner, then back to bed, lulled to sleep by the gentle sounds of a Balinese flute wafting in from the courtyard outside... Ahh, what a life!

#### **Day 4: Tue 21/6/94**

Awakened early by the sounds of incessant sweeping... this strange "sweeping ceremony" is performed constantly at Alit's, whether the ground needs it or not! Breakfast found us poring over maps, planning our "program" for the day.

Off we set, around 9am, heading into Denpasar. Our plan is to drive to Tanah Lot. The traffic as we neared Denpasar was just as hairy as before, but because we now had a map, at least we knew where we were and where we

were going - well, sort of. Also, being a little more accustomed to the "etiquette" of driving in Bali, it now seemed much easier. All day we probably only had no more than a dozen or so real near-death experiences... quite normal for Bali, I suspect!

So, through this maze of the one-way streets and complicated roundabouts we ventured... through Denpasar's spreading suburbs with their narrow lanes and street-encroaching houses, all packed together like sardines but surprisingly neat. Northwards we venture, through Sempedi, Lukluk (the "garden gnome" capital of Bali - if it's made of stone and lives in a garden, then this is the place!), Kapal, Tabanan. We are fascinated how each town or village appears to specialise in some small aspect of Balinese life or art... one place will make umbrellas, another the curlicues on temple roofs, another the gold-weave sashes for ceremonial use, etc...

As we get further from Denpasar the traffic thins and becomes less manic, making driving a bit more pleasant. Except for this insane urge requiring the Balinese to overtake any moving object which has the audacity to be ahead of them - regardless of the blind corners and oncoming traffic which should hint at the potential for disaster!

Enjoying the scenery and bright sunshine we head to Tanah Lot and find it nowhere near as overrun with gawking tourists and persistent hawkers as we were led to believe. It was low tide, and the little rocky island that forms the base of this impressive temple looked very vulnerable as people thronged around it. They all seemed to be enjoying the holiday-like atmosphere and all seemed intent on taking as many photos of themselves as possible... oft-times inviting us to pose with them, as seems to be the custom here.

Having taken our own photos of the impressive temple perched atop its own little island, we began to head back to the carpark when we were attracted to a small family group carrying out some sort of religious ceremony nearby. It appeared to be that occasion when an 8 month old child is allowed to have its feet touch the ground for the first time. All attention and activity appeared to be centred on the passively bemused toddler... bells ringing, priests chanting, incense burning, offerings being wrapped and unwrapped, water and oils splashing everywhere. And all being supervised by the obviously proud young parents. memories of witnessing similar activity 20 years ago came flooding back. I have to confess a similar degree of ignorance about what was happening this time too, however. The whole ceremony seemed to be orchestrated by an older woman who knew what every component was about and what every participant needed to do. This was fortunate because at times a few of the participants seemed nearly as lost as we felt! With the little ceremony concluded many of the offerings were left behind to be swept away by the incoming tide. The happy family group squeezed into 3 small trucks and rapidly departed.

We also drove off through the rice fields, pleased at having been able to witness a small sample of the religio-social life of traditional Bali. It was such a relief to see that it hasn't all succumbed to the lure of commercialisation or been lost in the frenzy of 20th Century life. We decided to take the advice of our Guide Book and drive the "tourist triangle" of Tabanan, Pupuan and Pulkan... to see "the most beautiful scenery in all of Bali". How could we resist such an audacious sales pitch?

Well, we weren't disappointed! Beautiful it most certainly was. A lot of driving it was, too. The distance wasn't so great (only about 100 kilometres) but the road was so sinuous and narrow that rarely could we exceed 40kph. But who would want to anyway when, at every turn there was some new compelling vista, competing with all the other vistas for the title of "the view that most sums up the beauty of Bali in one go". We would drive through village after village, rarely seeing any real poverty and, in fact, often remarking on the orderliness and cleanliness! We passed acres of coffee beans laid out to dry alongside the roads. Mountain views, valley gorges, banana plantations, coconut groves and terraced rice paddies were the raw ingredients of the scenes before us, all combined in different proportions as each bend in the road revealed the next concoction of beauty. I guessed that tourists rarely venture out here, judging by the ready smiles and friendly waves from the children as we drove past.

Weary from the driving we eventually find our way back to the solace of Sanur, returning the car to the hirers before indulging ourselves with an apple danish and a vanilla slice from the bakery up the road (yes, Bali has changed!)

A welcome dip in the pool, a meal at the Sanur markets then a slow walk along the moonlit beach and we were more than ready for sleep...

### ***Day 5: Wed 22/6/94***

Now that we're car-less we negotiated for a bemo to take us into Denpasar after breakfast. Bemos are now far more organised... colour-coded and with set routes. Prices are a bit more predictable, also, though they still "try it on" just to see if they can supplement the set price a little.

From the bemo station we walk. Down noisy, smelly streets throbbing with ceaseless traffic. I see many of my beloved 3-wheeled bemos... reduced to inner-city cartage, now, though. Even after 20 years of change I can still recognise some of the Denpasar landmarks... the museum, the park, the main intersection where the four-headed statue at its centre gazes immovably at the potential carnage at its feet. But the traffic all seems so subdued now... Maybe it's the recently introduced system of one-way streets. Maybe the cars

and bikes aren't quite as noisy as the armada of unmuffled bemos I remember. Maybe I'm just more used to "third world" traffic... compared to the chaotic carnage of Cairo, this is nothing!

Dodging the traffic, we enter Pura Jogatnatha, Bali's State Temple. here they attempt to worship ONE "Supreme Being", trying in vain to placate the rest of Islamic Indonesia by doing so. The images, however, - at least to this untrained eye - still look very Hindu!

Next door we enter the Museum, a valiant attempt at representing aspects of Bali's long history. Much of the written commentary on the displays provided little enlightenment but at least some amusement at the syntax and spelling.

Off across the smelly river/sewer, which hasn't changed much - perhaps it had reached its pollution saturation point 20 years ago? - to visit the "tourist market". The volume and variety of goods here astounds us. How could they possibly sell all of this stuff? They sold none of it to us, anyway.

Back over the river to Pasar Badung... the real markets... much more as I remember them. Fruit on the lower level, spices on the middle level and clothing on the top floor. At least they seem to sell their meat elsewhere now! The cacophony of smells, colours, textures and sounds really does overwhelm our senses, especially when there is little opportunity to sit a-while to take it all in... stand still for just a second and you're pestered incessantly by touts vociferously insisting that their stall is vastly superior to any other. It is difficult to see how any one stall can define itself as "better" when they all seem to sell the same stuff. Glenys becomes completely overwhelmed by it all... especially the badgering, so we beat a hasty exit into the open air, wondering what life must be like for those poor souls who have no choice but to remain in that stifling place.

We zig and we zag through the centre of Denpasar. We buy a pair of scissors. We located the Optician's shop where I replaced my stolen glasses 20 years ago. Much of the central shopping region appears little changed, except that the drain/sewer is now covered over in places, decreasing the distinctive odour a little, and the traffic appears to be somewhat more controlled. Some of the shops appear to be doing quite nicely... I wonder what it is that they have that dozens like them don't?

We walk to where the bemo station is supposed to be, according to our somewhat inadequate map. What we find is a horse-and-cart station. I won't even begin to describe my disgust and sorrow at the plight of these poor horses, doomed to a miserable life of noise, traffic, pollution and hard work. We eventually do find the blue-bemo station and are soon squeezed in with 18 others and their assorted luggage. Ahh, now this kind of traveling brings the memories flooding back!

The drive to Kuta yields sights that trigger more memories... the putrid drainage canal-come-river that parallels the road. The ramshackle buildings lining the canal. The rickety bridges spanning the chasm where putting one foot wrong could either mean instant death from the fall or, if you are unlucky, slow agonising death by any number of the possible diseases that lurk beneath that dark, oily surface.

Half an hour later, we reach our destination... Kuta. At least I think this is Kuta. Yes, it must be. The sign says so. But how come I don't recognise anything? This place looks more like a manic, miniaturised Surfers paradise - complete with McDonalds, Mr Whippy and advertisements for pub-crawls. No, this is not the Kuta I once loved so much I cried when I left. This is not the quiet, dark little laneways where we would spend those long tropical nights wandering, discussing our latest adventures and planning our next. What has happened? Twenty years of tourism and "progress", that's what!

Ahh... I recognise that name... "Poppi's Restaurant 75 Metres --->". Quick, let's follow that arrow. I'm right. The arrow pointed straight to a lingering memory from my long lost youth... and the restaurant where I spent so many hours all those years ago was still recognisable! A quite oasis from the hustle, hassle and bustle outside. We eat while Glenys kindly indulges my nostalgic reflections. Outside we wander down the maze of narrow lanes, paved now, their geography still etched in my memory. We get to the place where I remember my first losmen, Ratna, to have been. I ask. I'm told that the hotel I'm standing in is where Ratna once stood. I'm at once happy and sad. I can't explain why.

Down the lane toward the beach. Where have all the coconut groves gone? And the sand hills? And the grassy clearings. Where are the scattered houses... and where did this bloody road along the beachfront come from? The same waves ceaselessly pound the same shore... but it's NOT the same, is it? It is now a golden-sand altar at which the tourist sun-worshippers prostrate themselves before their sun-god. In their hundreds! The hotels, bungalows, home-stays, losmens, shops and hawkers are equally numerous... encroaching right onto the beach itself. I feel as though Bali's innocence has been violated!

In the shop-lined alleyways behind the beach, the usual array of tourist artifacts are peddled by those who appear to measure their commercial success by the degree of non-rejection they receive. Whenever I see this blatant display of commercialism... with its enormous volume of mostly meaningless merchandise, dressed up to display its inherent gaudiness, waiting patiently to entrap the unwary as they pass by, I think of the sea anemone, and how, like the shop keeper, it relies on sheer luck to survive. I also can't help but recall the phrase "living lives of quiet desperation". In fact,

whenever confronted by life in its "raw" forms I think of that phrase... and of how lucky I am to have had a particular sperm encounter a particular egg in a particular fallopian tube that just happened to be inside a woman living in Sydney, Australia in 1950.

I digress. We post a couple of postcards... each with a blanket of stamps obliterating half the words thereon. As if making a statement of resignation (or is it capitulation?) we buy a couple of Mr Whippy ice creams and eat them at a table no more than 30 feet away from some poor beggar squatting hopefully and helplessly in the filth of a nearby gutter. What sort of mean trick are these gods playing on us all, creating situations like this to somehow "test" us?

We negotiate transport back to Sanur... knowing we got a good bargain because of the look of grumpy disappointment on the driver's face when we arrived... "very far, very far..." he kept moaning.

We collapse into the pool and soak up the fading rays of the tropical sun. Agung and Sue's for dinner, then to bed...

### **Day 6: Thu 23/6/94**

Contrary to popular belief, we Murrays do spend money occasionally. And today we proved it. Straight after breakfast we set off southwards on foot. First stop, confirming our return flight with Garuda in the Bali Beach Hotel. Then down to the beach, somewhat narrowed by the extreme high tide. At various markets and stalls along the way we purchased several items, including:

2 batik sarongs, 1 pair of thongs, 1 pair of batik shorts, 1 pair of imitation batik trousers, 1 wooden (ebony) carving of Garuda, 1 handmade kite in the shape of an owl, 1 pair of Nike socks,

... plus assorted sustenance to fuel us during this uncharacteristic shopping expedition. We walked about two-thirds of the entire distance of Sanur Beach ("Oh, very far, mister. You want transport?"), down as far as the Bali Hyatt. Past the very expensive looking hotels with their oh-so-precious guests sunning themselves out front, sneering at the waves as if the tide has a real gall to occupy their beach! Past the touts and hawkers (Hey mister, you want look in my shop? You want massage, madam?, You want pedicure / manicure / parasailing / white water rafting / glass-bottom boat/sailing / etc?).

The saddest of them all, we both agreed, were the watch sellers, armed with their suitcases crammed full of fake watches. Each is desperately insistent, thrusting their gaudy goods in front of your face as you walk. In all of the

time we've been here we haven't seen even one watch seller make a sale. How on Earth do they make a living? And even if they sold just one watch (at \$4-5) what sort of profit could they possibly expect? Doesn't bear thinking about...

We stopped off at a place right on the beach that grows and sells bonsai trees, some of which resembled driftwood that had sprung to life. Magical. On we walked relishing the cool sea-breeze and dodging the odd wave that made it over the reef... causing the snooty German tourists to sneer even more.

Turning inland up a small road we veer north into Sanur's main "drag", checking out the numerous shops as we go. It was here that we bought the Garuda from a lady who tells us it was carved in Gianyar. We bought the kite from a guy who tells us he actually made it. He reveals that he makes two of them each week... and watching as he painstakingly pieces together a similar kite, we can well imagine it taking so long. It costs 38,000Rp, about \$22.

We witness ikat being hand woven outside one of the shops, the young girl doing the weaving looking particularly bored, looking right through us. It was as if she truly didn't want us to be there... but if we weren't she may not even have this mind-numbing job. I am guessing that the irony of this situation is not lost on her, hence her mood!?!

If we thought the watch sellers were a sad sight, we were confronted with real desperation just around the next bend. Our progress faltered for just a split second as we attempted to read a sign about a Wayang Kulit show. That was our big mistake. We were instantly descended upon by a small horde of girls anxious to show us their shops ("not same, different..."). It is very difficult to say no and not feel that you are being rude, so we reluctantly go with them. At the first shop, about the size of a small packing crate, we buy one very cheap sarong. We then feel compelled to buy another at "Lucy's" shop. A third girl with the even more unlikely name of "Mary Christmas" is almost crying because we haven't looked inside her shop. So we do. Of course it contains exactly the same stuff and we really don't need to buy any more. The logic that we don't really "need" it is, of course, lost on Mary. She quotes ridiculously low prices as we attempt to leave. She desperately thrusts shirts, shorts, thongs, anything in front of us, acting as if her very life depended on us buying something from her... and in a very real way I guess it does.

A glance past her pleading face, however, shows us the extent of the problem. Outside there are half a dozen other stall holders, all displaying the same sense of desperation. All with the clear intention of making us feel as if we just have to buy from them or their lives aren't worth living! We decide that we can't buy something from everyone in Bali, no matter how "worthy" their need. We just have to leave. The once smiling faces that had gleefully asked our names and where we were from now scowl darkly and tell us how mean we are. How can any of us "win" in this situation?

We seek uneasy solace from these dilemmas in a beachside restaurant where the cost of our lunch could have equaled Mary Christmas's weekly profit. What can I say except that the World is not, never has, and never will be "fair". And I just cannot carry the guilt for that fact, no matter what my emotions tell me. If someone knows the answers to such dilemmas I'm open to suggestions!

Back to Alit's for an afternoon of reading, relaxing, swimming and watching the world slowly drift by on the beach. With the tide now well and truly out we observe the jukungs skillfully negotiate the tricky reef passage as they make their nimble way to and from Nusa Penida. We marvel at the immense patience of the fishermen and women who stand for hours in knee-deep water appearing to our untrained eye to never catch anything. Some even squeeze themselves into inflated rubber inner tubes, drop a small rock as an anchor and wallow for hours on end with the ever-hopeful line dangling beside them. We watch the bathing rituals of the Balinese as they deftly, and modestly change from their saturated clothes to dryer garb, screened only by a small towel.

We also explored the opulent extensions to the burgeoning Alit's empire at it attempts to leap from 3 to 5 star accommodation in the near future. At least we were some of the first to swim in their new pool!

For the past couple of days we have been surrounded by all sorts of activity - little huts being built everywhere, important-looking people coming and going, more intense sweeping than usual, plants and lawns being groomed and a covered stage erected by the pool. Today we learned that all this was for a member of "the boss's" family who is to be married on Monday. Pity we won't be here, but we did get to sit in on a "practice session" for the gamelan orchestra. Oh how I feel drawn to these complex, though somehow simple, sounds. I can easily understand how intoxicating these rhythms can be... almost hypnotic. I'd like to see someone meld these ancient rhythms and sounds with more contemporary "Western" music. We need Paul Simon to visit Bali!

As we listened from poolside we met an elderly Dutch/New Zealand couple happily spending their children's' inheritance on traveling the world. "Can't take it with you", they kept saying. I couldn't agree more.

We ate dinner at the mysteriously named "Bali 16" restaurant. I thought there might have been "magic mushrooms" in the food when I glimpsed a rabbit dance across the tiles behind Glennys, but since she saw it too it was probably quite real!

Time for sleep...

## **Day 7: Fri 24/6/94**

Awoken by the scratching sound of broom on tile. Again. After breakfast we walked to the end of the road to watch the fury of a high tide combine with the waves from a storm way out to sea to eat away ravenously at what little is left of the beach. On several occasions the waves crashed over the sea wall, spraying the shops and stall with salty spray and froth. As if their lives weren't difficult enough!

Back to Alit's to pack and wait for the ride to Ubud. As we wait we observe the quickening pace of preparations for Monday's wedding... in particular, the five men squatting in Alit's courtyard trimming the palm fronds to fringe the dozens of bamboo arches lining the pathways. And then there was the guy up the palm tree, clearing it of any objects (branches, leaves, coconuts) that may take the untimely opportunity of landing on the happy couple. Quite a sight to see him shinny up and down the almost vertical trunk using only hands and feet!

The car arrived early, manned by Peter and Agus. Why there is always TWO I'll never quite work out... maybe yet another example of "disguised unemployment"? We drove to Ubud under ominously greying skies, taking many of the back roads to avoid the worst of the traffic and to give us a glimpse of some of the more interesting countryside... which, especially as we neared Ubud, was very interesting indeed.

In Ubud we checked into the Tjampuan Hotel, on the site of Walter Spies' old house, and took up residence in a beautiful little bungalow overlooking a deep gorge. We quickly set out on our "orientation" walk, delayed slightly as we pause to gasp at the sight of three women carrying huge piles of river rocks on their heads. Yes, river rocks!

The old suspension bridge I remembered from 1975 still spans the gorge but is now unused and in grave disrepair. Beside it stands the new reinforced concrete 2-lane bridge that seems to symbolise much of what has happened to Bali in all those years.

The walk into the centre of town takes a leisurely 20 minutes. Amazingly, though we pass numerous shops on the way, we are rarely "hassled" to buy anything. What a welcome relief from the persistent haranguing we were used to down south. Even those touting for "transport" only ask once, then leave you alone! Bliss!

We lunch at "Mumbles" where it takes 45 minutes to be served ("sorry, sir, but he forgot the order..."). We stroll, with minimal molestation, through the two-storey market. We amble up and down the main street, pausing at galleries and shops, admiring the charm and beauty of this unique town. We even find

a 'supermarket' and buy "nibblies" to consume back at our room... which is now where we head for a bit of "R and R".

At 6pm we head off through the slowly increasing drizzle to Bona, a village about 12 kilometres away. Here we witness a truly unique display of Balinese culture. First, the Ketchak dance... in the very village where this dance was born, so we are told. The pulsating rhythm and the mysterious vocals, combined with the hypnotic choreography of masses of arms and bodies in synchronised motion brought memories of my first ketchak experience flooding back. While this one was clearly put on for us tourists it was pleasingly not over-commercialised. The subdued lighting, the dirt floor and thatched roof all added to the authenticity and atmosphere. Even some of the singers appeared to be genuinely entranced. Others didn't... especially the couple near us who took the opportunity of having to sit closely front-to-back to do certain hand movements that most definitely were not in the script!

The sounds, the dancing, the time-honoured story of good vanquishing evil... these form a large part of my precious Bali memories. And here I was, enjoying them again. What joy.

Following the Ketchak dance came a "Trance dance", performed by two very lithe and very young girls who danced a slow Legong-like dance with eyes firmly shut - entranced by the competing male and female choruses on the stage behind them.

Lastly, a fire-walking trance dance, where a young man riding a rattan "horse" ran wildly around the stage area kicking and walking through the embers of a fire made of coconut husks and kerosene. Whether or not he was actually in a trance was difficult to tell, but, as with the other performances, he was blessed by a priest just in case the bad demons had got hold of him.

Driven back through the drizzle, we were dropped in the centre of town. We ate at a spectacular looking restaurant called the Lotus Pond, located on the edge of (you guessed it!) lotus pond which in turn formed part of the ornate entrance to a huge ancient temple. It was all rather dream-like.

### **Day 8: Sat 25/6/94**

A big day.

Following a terrific breakfast in the beautiful surrounds of the Tjampuan restaurant we changed rooms to a larger upstairs room with a high, vaulted thatched roof and even better views of the spectacular gorge below. Made, our "house-boy" assisted our move. His job is to come whenever we dong the wooden gong hanging on our verandah. he is 31 years old, with a wife and

child and lives in Ubud. He probably supports this family on little more than \$50-60 per month. I constantly remind myself just how lucky we are!

We begin walking to the bemo station but negotiate for a car and driver on the way. We are driven down potholed, narrow streets to Batuan. Here, in a dusty, even narrower laneway, beside a swiftly flowing drainage canal full of ducks and early morning bathers we find Agus's family house. (Agus is the Balinese husband of Louise, a work colleague and friend of mine back in Sydney. Louise had given us a package of clothing to drop off to her "in-laws"). We are met enthusiastically by Agus's father who promptly sits us down and makes us sweet tea. He soon hands over the burden of conversation to Agus's younger brother whose mastery of English was somewhat better. As topics for conversation with him began to wane we were rescued by a strange fellow called Gareth, an expatriate Brit who appeared to be living in the family compound. He could speak fluent Indonesian and so was able to translate, allowing us to extend the conversation further. However, his reluctance to reveal what he was doing there led us to surmise that maybe, like so many other expats, he was running away from 'something'.

With conversation exhausted, photos taken, smiles and gifts exchanged, Gareth led us down the tangle of laneways to the "other" road where we catch a bemo to Gianyar. Squeezed in like sweaty sardines, the Balinese never seem inclined to say "excuse me" or "thank you" as they clamber past (or over) one another to reach their square centimetre of seat. Their patience extends to their expressionless faces, which is very unfortunate because they really do light up whenever they smile. Perhaps there is little to smile about while wedged into a smelly, noisy bemo with your knees touching your chin?

At Gianyar we seek the main Temple where, so Gareth told us, a celebration of the Temple's founding was to be held. With golden sashes around our waists we venture expectantly inside where we find dozens of agitated men milling around the compound, encircling an arena where two large and very handsome roosters were being prepared to fight to the death. "Prepared" meant having long, razor sharp blades attached to their feet... this cockfight was for real! When the "ready" signal was eventually given the arena was cleared of all but the two handlers grasping their hapless birds, and two other men who were busily collecting bets. The tension reached a climax when the throng of men surrounding the arena began a 'ketchak" chorus, complete with waving arms. As this rose to a crescendo, money changed hands at a great rate and the swaying circle of men all rose to their feet and arched forward. The handlers, now at fever pitch, each taunted the other's rooster by repeatedly thrusting his own bird towards it. Suddenly each rooster was set free. The audience erupted in noise.

After the dust and feathers had settled, one of the roosters lay in the dirt spasming and bleeding, the other held victoriously aloft by its proud owner.

Bets settled, the whole process was to begin again, the owners sitting in a close circle displaying their prized roosters, comparing weight and aggression with each other until two are chosen, prepared and then let loose to either kill or be killed. Glenys was unable to watch the fighting but I stood, fascinated by the spectacle.

Eventually we wandered into the next compound of the temple where the gaudy preparations for the rest of the ceremony were well underway. Since it appeared that the cockfighting was to take up most of today, we decided to head back to Ubud. So off we go in another little sardine can (ie, a bemo) with my sore throat ominously hinting at some dreaded disease heading my way.

A beaut lunch at Ary's then we walk down Monkey Forest Road to (yes, you guessed it!) the Monkey Forest... a small grove of rainforest inhabited by three bands of long-tailed macaques. Our anticipation of their aggression (fuelled by my own recollections and stories we had been told and read) was not realised at all. The monkeys were playful, demonstrative and decidedly friendly. Perhaps this has a lot to do with the prominent signs (in English) urging us not to feed them - advice quite contrary to that offered by the peanut sellers lining the road leading to the Forest!

We walk slowly back to Ubud, via Padangtegal, poking into the myriad shops, admiring the vast array of stuff for sale... from bamboo gamelans to bedspread covers. All produced with the skill, artistry and flair synonymous with this creative area of Bali.

Back to the hotel to give the antibiotics a chance of catching up with the bugs throwing a party in my throat, then a quick walk through the gathering dusk to Ubud Palace to see the Legong Dance. We arrive 40 minutes early but the place is already half full of fellow tourists... all of whom appear to have been given the same advice to ensure a seat. While we wait we chat to an American couple - also happy to be "frittering away" their children's inheritance on trips to far-away exotic destinations.

The dancing and the music was just superb... vibrant, colourful, graceful, dramatic, surprising, mystical, exotic, captivating, hypnotic. Quite a feast for eyes and ears accustomed to more "Western" entertainment. Glenys was as captivated and enthralled as I was... and the Americans agreed with me that Paul Simon (or someone with similar musical talent) should amalgamate gamelan music with Western jazz or rock...

With ears ringing, soul soaring but nose running, we have dinner at "Mumbles" before trudging wearily back to the Tjampuan.

### **Day 9: Sun 26/6/94**

Awakened by the banshee-like howls of Ubud's numerous dogs, my white corpuscles still putting up a valiant defence against the microscopic evil spirits invading my circulatory system. I have a cold! After another scrummy breakfast we head for the Tourist Information Office where we are allotted a number and told to wait for our bemo - along with dozens of other expectant tourists. Twelve of us squeeze into a bemo the same size as the one that carried twenty Balinese yesterday... we all seem so BIG. Off we zoom, over windy, pot-holed, narrow roads to the village of Tegallalang. We are here, along with half the tourist population of Bali, to witness the cremation of a 78-year-old Major in the Indonesian Army - an elder from this village.

As we arrive, all attention centres around the gold and white three-tiered tower perched atop its raft of bamboo, waiting in front of the dead man's house. Inside the courtyard of the house lies the coffin, surrounded by intricate and colourful offerings, the family appearing quite unperturbed by the streams of camera-wielding tourists filing past.

After an hour or so, without any obvious sign of warning, the small (but very loud) gamelan orchestra suddenly began its rhythmic cacophony. Equally suddenly, through the narrow doors of the house emerged about 20 men, dressed in black and with considerable exuberance, carrying the rattan-enwrapped body. Off they zoomed, weaving their erratic way up the street, bowling unwary tourists over in their frenzy. Ten minutes later they zoomed back past the house, down the street, making as much noise and commotion as possible. Apparently much of the Balinese cremation ceremony is designed to confuse the spirits. By the look of bewilderment on the faces of many of our fellow tourists, it is designed also to confuse tourists!

Half an hour passes, then a stream of women and girls emerge from the house, laden with offerings. Then comes the platform, on which the exhumed body has now been placed... it doesn't fit through the door, even after trying every possible angle, so it is eventually passed over the wall. Then comes the coffin, borne aloft by a sea of willing hands, to be wedged in the uppermost tier of the tower. With two men "riding shotgun" on either side of the coffin the whole structure is suddenly wrenched skywards by about 50 men and boys, all dressed in black with white headbands. Zigging and zagging, screaming and yelling, they bear the dangerously swaying tower about a kilometre or so down the road with the whole village seeing it on its way, often spraying the sweat-drenched bearers with copious amounts of ill-aimed water.

The logistics of a 10 metre high tower passing beneath 9 metre high electricity wires is solved by two men wielding long bamboo poles with rubber tyres attached to their ends. These are deftly employed to hold the offending wires aloft on either side of the precariously swaying tower. At one stage this

process succeeded in causing the two wires to connect. Sparks arced across the previously separated wires, with the procession pausing briefly to watch the impromptu fireworks. Amusement, however, quickly turned to concern when one of the wires broke off whipping into the water-soaked roadway just behind the gamelan troupe (and just in front of me!), spewing sparks menacingly from its ruptured end. However, the friendly spirits must have been looking after us as no-one was hurt. The procession continued on its way.

On reaching the open spaces of the burial ground, the platform was rotated a number of times then parked beside a large white effigy of a very obviously aroused bull. The back of the bull was cut open, the coffin removed from the tower and the body removed from the coffin and placed inside the bull.

Amid the commotion and the crowds I saw one woman - probably the deceased's daughter - sitting on the ground, her head buried in her hands, quietly sobbing. This was the only outward sign of grief I had so far observed. It served to remind me - as it should have reminded all the other tourists here for the "show" - that we are here witnessing the final episode of a person's life... someone who loved and who was loved; who touched the lives of many people and deserves at least the passing respect of us strangers to his land.

Numerous offerings and belongings were placed into and under the bull, and the base on which the bull stood was deftly rearranged to more efficiently contain the impending flames. Once the "civilian" part of the ceremony was completed, the "military" part began. While four young soldiers held the Indonesian flag over the bull, and twenty or so soldiers and veterans stood to attention, an elderly, obviously high-ranking officer read a long eulogy. His speech finished, he wiped a few tears from his wrinkled eyes as he asked for the speech to be placed in the bull alongside his comrade.

Large blowtorches were then set up on either side of the bull and the whole contraption set alight. As the belly of the bull burned away you could clearly see the body of the deceased Major fall into the flames below, sending sparks flying. There is definitely none of your "behind-closed-doors" cremations here! Behind us the tower, still attached to its bamboo platform was also set alight.

With the old major's body now rapidly returning to the elements from which it came - and his soul at last set free to experience his Balinese heaven - we found our bemo and headed back to Ubud to discuss our mixture of feelings about all these strange experiences over a chicken sate and cheese and tomato sandwich.

Back to the hotel to let the antibodies regroup in expectation of another corpuscular assault, then back to Mumbles for another of their delicious Mee Gorengs. Then a long walk east of town to the Oka Kartini where we were to

experience a cut-down "Westernised" version of a Wayang Kulit (Shadow Puppet) show. While waiting, we met an interesting American couple who, taking leave from their jobs, are traveling leisurely through South east Asia and Australia. they spoke of their encounters with "rehabilitated" Orang-utans, making us quite envious of their lifestyle.

The play itself was without doubt one of the best I've seen. Firstly, because it was significantly shortened. Secondly, because a lot of the "boring bits" (like interminable, unintelligible dialog behind an otherwise blank screen) were removed. And thirdly, because the story was explained both in a written program and by a very entertaining gentleman who helpfully identified the good guys, the baddies, the scene changes, the various types of wayang (puppets) and the roles of the master puppeteer and his four hard-working assistants. We even got a small lecture on the success of family planning in Bali!

Armed with this background, our appreciation of the play was greatly enhanced - and the injection of the odd word of English into the otherwise impenetrable dialogue by the extremely vocally adept master puppeteer added even more to our enjoyment.

Backstage after the show we stood amazed at the number and array of puppets and the undeniable skill of the man who can hold an audience spellbound for hours on end with little more than a sheet, a flickering oil lamp, a number of pierced-leather figures and a little gamelan - kept in tempo by his own foot banging on a little wooden drum. We were enthralled.

The long walk home took us right through town. Most of the shops were closed now but the usually lethargic dogs were beginning to stir, practicing their tourist-terrifying banshee howls as the full moon behind the gently waving trees created its own magical shadow play on the road ahead.

What a wonderful place is this. So vibrant and alive. So full of interesting and strange things. I am again experiencing those exciting feelings that led me to fall in love with Bali so many years ago...

### ***Day 10: Mon 27/6/94***

... and Bali's bugs definitely seem to like me! I spent nearly the whole day in bed, unable to summon the energy to move. By nightfall I was feeling a little better so we walked to the nearby Murni's restaurant for dinner. As the cold symptoms recede they are replaced with an equally debilitating attack of "Bali Belly" ... oh well, can't win them all!

Glenys kindly reminds me that I have had an upper respiratory tract infection on every trip I have been on outside Australia. I have no idea if there is any

concealed meaning in that miserable statistic, but it is definitely not going to stop me from traveling.

### **Day 11: Tue 28/6/94**

Neither of us slept well last night. I was on and off the toilet throughout, discovering how well our toilet bowl resonates in the otherwise quiet hours of early morning.

With the eventual arrival of dawn (at last!) I still feel like death warmed up but am adamant that another of these precious days is not lost. So after a breakfast of weak tea, toast and 2 Lomotil, interrupted by a couple of hurried trips to the loo, we hire a car and driver to view some of Bali's more mountainous sights.

Our driver, Ida, is 42 and speaks English quite well. We are able to learn much from just talking with him as we journey down Bali's highways and by-ways. For example, he tells us of his family - and how his daughters value their education over an early marriage. he tells us how it's bad luck to run down a cat or a goose. Dogs, apparently, are considered fair game! He tells us of the multitude of forms of the one Hindu god - of Vishnu, Brahma and Siva. he describes life in his village (near Gianyar) and how Bali's population control policies appear to be working.

On the way to Besakih we stop at a wood-carving centre just outside Mas. Here we marvel at the "production line" process, where one person selects and trims the wood into the rough shape, the next person carves the details, and the next carves the faces. All of these artisans appear to be men. The remaining processes of sanding and polishing are done by women.

The skill of all these people is awesome... no patterns to work from other than the ones they carry in their heads. And the final product is just so beautiful and intricate. I can't help thinking that if there weren't so many of them, each on its own would be considered a priceless work of art. Of course, they do have a price... but in this particular "tourist trap" they are horrendously high... \$800 for a 30cm statue. So we leave empty handed, much to the feigned disgust of the guy showing us around.

Next stop, Besakih, the Mother Temple. Last time I was here this was a scene of incredible activity. This time we contented ourselves with being awestruck at its silent majesty - looming out of Agung's mists you can almost feel her power. My power, on the other hand, is fading fast. I could hardly climb the stairs and I was thankful that Ida was able to drive up a back street to drop us near the base of the temple rather than having us walk the usual one kilometre hike up from the car park... I'm not sure that I would have survived!

Leaving the Besakih complex behind us, we head now over cool mountain roads, past tobacco and coffee plantations, past groves of rainforest and through countless little villages, to Kintamani... situated on the rim of a huge caldera that contains the mystical waters of Lake Batur. We eat lunch (or, at least, Glenny and Ida eat. I make a feeble attempt) in a swish little restaurant with million-dollar views over the lake. In front of us we can see the blackened scar of the 1979 eruption... with the odd wisp of smoke betraying the fact that this particular volcano can't yet be classified as "dormant"!

With my body temperature soaring, i collapse back into the car... no precarious trekking through Batur's volcanic tuff on this trip! We drive along a different route... through villages with distinctive Chinese character, and stop at a shop selling bed-covers. I am not in the mood for bargaining (or living, for that matter!) so I offer a ridiculously low price - only to have it surprisingly accepted. We are now the proud owners of a bright blue Balinese bedspread!

Next stop, the Pura Penataran Sasih, in Pejung. Here we see a very old and revered bronze drum, thought to be 1,000 years older than the region itself. It is here, also, that Ida tells us the story of two dead and buried children coming back to life. The matter-of-fact way in which he tells us such stories merely reinforces the width of the chasm of belief and assumption that lies between the Balinese world-view and our own.

With me suddenly breaking into a cold, shivering sweat - and feeling the better for it! - we proceed to Goa Gajah, the Elephant Cave Temple. There are over 9,000 temples in Bali and no, we don't intend to visit them all, so don't panic! This particular ancient temple complex has as its focus a small T-shaped cave guarded by a mysterious elephantine figure carved into the stone above its entrance. Within the dark, musty interior are three shrines containing very old and very sacred relics lit, in one case, by a feeble electric globe and in another by an even more feeble oil lamp. The external buildings were all but destroyed in a recent earthquake and their remains are reverently stacked in neat but rapidly decaying piles off to one side.

last stop, a cooperative art gallery where we witness the process of producing "traditional" Balinese painting... and what a skillful, time-consuming, intricately detailed process it is! We spend some time wandering through the extensive gallery, marveling at the artistry of these artists, learning about the different "schools" of art and technique. Some works, by well-known Balinese artists easily exceed \$1,000... well beyond our reach.

Back to Tjampuhan, where I crash into a sleep of utter exhaustion but awake a couple of hours later feeling much better. So off we go to Mumbles for an early dinner before returning for a well-earned sleep.

## **Day 12: Wed 29/6/94**

Feeling much better after 11 hours of blissful sleep, we decide to turn right, for a change, as we leave the Tjampuhan (after complaining for the umpteenth time about the lack of hot water). Turning right takes us up the hill, away from Ubud. After a kilometre or so of uphill trudging, avoiding the drains, the trucks and the rabid dogs, we welcome the chance to indulge our more "artistic" sensibilities at the Neka Museum. Here we travel through several pavilions, each displaying a different age or style of Balinese art. The accompanying descriptions are very informative and help us appreciate the style and interpret the images. Unfortunately there was only one painting by Walter Spies but we found ourselves instantly drawn to it, whetting our appetites for more.

Deciding to brave the narrow road, putrid drains and even more rabid dogs (or at least that's how Glenny sees them!), we venture onward to Sanggingan - a small village on the crest of the main ridge separating the Agung and Wos rivers. On to Kedewatan where we at last are able to turn downhill, past the swank \$800-a-night Amandari Resort, past the long line of bemos waiting for the white-water-rafters, past the multitude of locals attempting (mostly in vain) to peddle their wood carvings and colourful sarongs to the saturated rafters who, in the unlikely event that as they emerged breathless from the rapids wanting a hand-carved chess set, would be unable to pay since most were clad in bathing costume and sneakers only.

On past several young men promising us "beautiful panoramas" if only we would follow them down their particular path. On to Penestenan, a small village which is now almost a suburb of Ubud. here, as elsewhere in the Ubud region, we are stunned by the sheer volume of artistic talent... we must have passed hundreds of places, each boasting a "famous artist" or "traditional painter" or a "modern/young artist" or, sometimes, all of the above! Talent in such abundance tends to become so easily undervalued... a tragic irony that typifies much of Bali's modern dilemma.

Eventually we wend our increasingly weary way through moss-covered narrow cuttings, hewn from the dark volcanic rock of the ridges, to emerge on the main road to Ubud, just west of the suspension bridge. We have just walked 10 kilometres through some of the hilliest parts of Bali. No wonder we're feeling weary. So, up the hill we trudge. Into Ubud for lunch and a well-deserved chance to just sit and observe the passing parade of people.

Reflecting on this morning's marathon I couldn't help but notice that the open friendliness that I had encountered on similar perambulations 20 years ago has well and truly disappeared. Rarely are our smiles returned with any degree of sincerity... more often than not a wave or a smile is interpreted as an invitation to be offered something to buy... "transport", "map", "beautiful panorama", "wood carving", etc. The never-ending persistence and the lack of

any real desire to communicate without an ulterior, commercial, motive is becoming very wearing. You find yourself being quite rude, sometimes, when trying to dissuade them from their unwanted attentions. Innocence lost? Yes, I think so.

Reflecting even further... in the humble opinion of this "outsider", Bali would benefit greatly from banning two-stroke engines, introducing noise pollution laws, banning plastic bags and bottles, introduce plastic recycling and, since I'm on a pontificating roll here, drastically limiting her population. As a tourist destination I feel that Bali is still trading on its 1930's image, not its 1990's reality. You certainly couldn't describe walking down a narrow, dusty, smelly road, flirting with death as each vehicle roars past or as each mangy dog growls menacingly, asphyxiating on the fumes, unable to talk above the din, trying to ignore the piles of rubbish everywhere as "Paradise on Earth", now could you?

After lunch we found our long-sought-for second hand bookstore where they recycle books for half price. Glenny bought 2.5 kilograms of books, promising that she'll have read them by the time we'll leave. I couldn't even turn all those pages that fast!

A little more shopping then back to the Tjampuhan for a welcome break from the noise, dust, fumes, peddlers and tired feet.

Six PM, time to move. Off into Ubud for a quick dinner, then to the Palace for more "Bali Culture"... this time, a combination of excerpts from the Legong, a solo Barong performance and the main event, a story from the Mahabatera epic featuring the battle for the love of a goddess between two ogre-ish giants, Sunda and Upasunda. Once again, a top performance... it makes such a difference knowing the story in advance and recognising the characters. I also helps being more familiar with the music... which we both loved so much that we bought the CD.

Back through the dark and the fumes to Tjampuhan with slightly ominous rumblings in my alimentary canal. Maybe Made stopped placing his little offerings in front of our door a little too soon!

### **Day 13: 30/6/94**

I spent only half of last night on the loo. I must remember to write a thank-you letter to the makers of Lomotil. With the morning showers getting progressively colder we complained for the umpteenth-plus-one time. This was obviously the magic number because it resulted in a hammer-wielding gent attacking the footpath outside our bathroom! Apparently the pipe had been leaking for some time and the only previous action had been to cut a groove across the path to divert the flow!

So, after our tentative shower we had a tentative breakfast (not once since we've been here have they got our breakfast order right), then stepped tentatively over the growing pile of rubble outside our door into the street to negotiate our transport for the day. We chose Dewa and his younger brother Dewa (don't ask me how they keep track of who's who when everyone in Bali seems to select from a limited number of monikers). For 50,000Rp they happily agreed to take us to Lake Bratan and back... ostensibly to see the picturesque Pura Ulu Danau, but really just to see more of the "agricultural" Bali, away from the noise and hustle of the tourist areas.

Dewa (the elder) quickly gleaned our real purpose and wherever possible drove us "off the beaten track" (his words!), through small and well-kept villages, past fields of corn, herbs, tobacco, coffee, cacao, potato and, of course, rice, rice, and more rice. Dewa was keen to learn more English, so would never tire of answering our many questions. He drove us down lanes that even he had not traveled before. He was happy to wait for us to absorb the sights in our own sweet time... and he didn't even look like taking us to his second-cousin's umbrella factory/shop "just to look".

The day was sunny and clear, affording magnificent views of the gorges and valleys as we ascended the myriad ridges that radiate from Bali's backbone. We could see Agung's mighty summit from nearly every lookout... a rare sight indeed, since it is normally enshrouded in mist.

We take a small diversion into the Botanic Gardens to see the much-praised orchids (which were disappointing) and the less well advertised view of Lake Bratan (which was literally breathtaking!).

A quick descent into the caldera and I am once more on the shores of Lake Bratan. I get a slight hint that a few million tourists have also discovered this magnificent jewel since my last visit here when I have to pass numerous shops before arriving at the shore - and I have to pay 500Rp for a pee!... but at least the souvenir-sellers aren't too bothersome.

Why are we here? To see one of Bali's most beautiful temples, Ulu Danau, that's why. Ulu Danau is an ancient Hindu/Buddhist structure dedicated to the goddess of the waters. With one of its meru-containing courtyards appearing to actually float on the lake, it couldn't possibly be any closer to the water it was designed to worship. Somehow, however, the trample of tourists, the buzz of motorboats(!) and the intrusion of the occasional paraglider into the scene does detract somewhat from the temple's obvious invitation to quiet introspection and meditation... but it remains a beautiful sight nonetheless.

Back we go, past the many luxury hotels which dominate the heads of most valleys, past the vehicles that stream up the mountainsides to escape the heat

below. Past the truck whose engine decided to explode all over the road, only marginally slowing the traffic behind it.

Dewa tries a few routes on the way back where I am forced to eat some of those words I wrote yesterday... here, "off the beaten track", there are people - especially the children - who still respond warmly to a smile and a wave... with no hint of suspicion or ulterior motive. They respond here more like I was used to them responding all those years ago. They seem to see us more as fellow humans, interested in their world, not merely as sources of money.

Having followed the most zig-zaggy route imaginable we ultimately emerge back in Ubud - where I dine on bread and water as Glenys pigs out on a tuna pita! Both our throats feel tired and raw... we suspect the dust and pollution. A pall of thick smog, penetrating up every valley was clearly visible from our mountainous vantage points, reminding us (as if we needed reminding) that we are in an overpopulated Third World country where the quality of their environment is not considered a high priority next to the challenges of merely surviving from one day to the next.

Back to the Tjampuhan for our usual late afternoon "R and R" and, miracle of miracles, HOT WATER.

Five PM. Dewa and Dewa pick us up once more - this time to drive us to the village of Petulu to witness the daily return of thousands of herons to their roosting trees in and around the village. It is said that the herons first appeared in 1965 and were thus considered a good omen. They have returned every evening since. On especially "auspicious" occasions it is alleged that their return is often led by the black "king" of the herons... supposedly the bird that led them here originally. Whatever the story of their origins and their "meaning", they are certainly here now! Great squadrons in V-formation winging in from the southern rice-fields, each bird cautiously circling its own tree then squabbling noisily with its neighbours for a suitable parking spot. Any tree, even the spiky coconut palms, appear to be fine to roost in. Some of the nests - still with young aboard - were even built very precariously atop bunches of coconuts. We hoped that the young chicks would learn to fly before their foundations of coconuts ripened and fell!

Under rapidly darkening skies we bounce our way back to Ubud for a "bland" meal (hoping it'll work this time!), then the usual torch-lit stroll back to the Tjampuhan.

### **Day 14: Fri 1/7/94**

At last, on the day we leave, we actually have hot water coming out of our shower! We took this as a good omen for the rest of the day, so off to a full breakfast, my first for several days. Then back to our room to pack our

significantly increased volume of stuff and to relax on the verandah, finishing our assortment of magazines and books (yes, Glenys did read 2.5 kilograms of books in less than a day!). Since we need to vacate our room by midday, at 11:30 we bid farewell to Made, congratulate the grumpy guy at Reception on the eventual success of the plumbing and store our bulging luggage in his office.

We intend to spend the rest of the day roaming the backstreets of Ubud, so that is exactly what we do. After a beautiful final meal at Mumble's we discover that Glenny's abdomen now appears to be reacting angrily to the foreign bugs she has been happily ingesting until now... just as mi own stomach seems to be becoming more accustomed to them. We return Glenny's more weighty tomes to the half-back shop and exchange them for lighter ones, thinking, of course, of the limited carrying capacity of the Jumbo jet.

Then we amble in and out of shops, side-streets, alleys and markets, feeling strangely comfortable with it all now. We buy a few little odds and ends but generally just absorb the sights, sounds and smells of Ubud. We find ourselves down near the Monkey Forest so we decide to re-investigate the preparations for the temple festival, planned for later this month.

We are astonished at the incredible level of activity. Dozens of villagers are busily occupied at preparing food, making, transporting or arranging offerings, building or decorating platforms, containers, whole buildings, even building two barongs. And the point of all this activity? Nothing less than "The Grand Ceremony to Harmonise the Universe", according to our guide book. And boy, are they organised! Everyone seems to know exactly what they need to do - and they do it with such skill, humour and cooperation. They have even produced a well-written pamphlet explaining the purpose and importance of the festival which apparently occurs only once every 25 years and takes four months of frantic activity for its preparation. Here they even supply us uncouth foreigners with free sarongs and sashes. Unprecedented!

Amazed at the pervasiveness of such devotion in the people of Bali, we amble once more up the Monkey Forest Road. We haven't travelled 500 metres before we encounter another concoction of sights and sounds that cause us to "stop awhile". (Bali seems so full of these sorts of encounters). This time we witness some sort of gamelan contest. Entire gamelan orchestras, representing different regions around Ubud, process slowly down the jalan from the Ubud Palace, turning into the football field where we (and a couple of thousand others) now stand.

Once in the field the "teams" enter a bamboo-fenced area where they face a panel of judges. We stand in awe at the complexity of sounds that emerge from such seemingly simple percussion instruments - gongs, drums and

cymbals - as each troupe seems to outperform the preceding ones...a feat which we would have thought impossible as we heard each one, thinking "how could anyone possibly top this?". But they do. The variety of rhythms, tones and melodies is amazing. The colour and presentation, spectacular. The atmosphere, with hundreds of people obviously enjoying the spectacle, contagious. We hang around for more than two hours, enthralled with it all.

Then the time comes to leave. Off we go for a final meal at casa Luna (Grilled Tuna, yum!), a little more people-watching, a little more shopping, then to Tjampuhan where our "courtesy vehicle" picks us up for the one-hour drive to the airport. Our guide for this short journey through the dark and rain was able to distract our attentions from the multiple near-death experiences we appeared to be having, by talking, in very good English, about the differences in culture and politics between "mainland Indonesia", Bali and "the West". Very interesting and perceptive he was, too. What a pity we had to wait for our last day in Indonesia before meeting him!

A couple of hours in a couple of airports, six hours in a very smooth and quiet Airbus, and several fitful attempts at sleep later and we are in Sydney... cold, drizzly, overcast Sydney. We are both still sick, so for that reason alone we are glad to be home. But this desire, as usual with such homecomings, is mixed with other more confused feelings. Feelings fuelled by the new perspectives one inevitably has when stepping outside the rut of familiarity and comfort. I remark, during one of these reflective post-journey conversations, on the significance of the fact that the only times I've considered my life experiences notable enough to record in a detailed Diary is when I'm travelling.

Interesting, eh?

## Vietnam

Click [HERE](#) for photos.

*In 2000 Glenys and I travelled with another three friends to Vietnam. We had known Nic and Vera for some time... I had worked with Vera in TAFE. None of us knew Liz before this trip, apart from a brief "getting to know you" encounter at Hans's house where we mutually agreed that we would probably get along just fine. Hans was a friend who worked in the travel industry and had arranged our trip but was unable to join us, organising instead for us to be met by various local guides. None of us had visited Vietnam before and were all equally unsure what to expect...*

### **Day 1: Sat 29/4/2000**

Caught a taxi to the airport. Very friendly driver. Arrived at 2:15pm... early as is our usual habit. Met with Vera, Nic and Liz and promptly joined the wrong queue! Nic eventually found the right queue and we checked in. Thai Airways TG992 left at 4:35 and proved to be a very smooth flight... long enough for one crappy movie and one good one (Stuart Little). The food was great, but then I do appear to have this thing for airline food!

We arrived in Bangkok right on time (1:20am our time, 10:20pm local time) and checked into Louis' Day Rooms for 8 hours. I had a fabulous sleep, but needed those earplugs.

### **Day 2: Sun 30/4/2000**

Breakfast of sweet toast, banana and malaria tablet. We spent the morning wandering aimlessly around the plentiful airport shops in this huge airport. Didn't buy a thing.

We boarded the plane right on time for another very smooth flight. My neighbour was a 30 year old Vietnamese woman called Grace who, she told me, had fled Vietnam at the age of six, spent time in a refugee camp in Indonesia and settled in Roseberry, a suburb of Sydney. She complained bitterly that you couldn't criticise the Vietnamese Government.

We arrived into the steamy heat of Ho Chi Minh City (nee Saigon) exactly on time. Spent an inordinate part of the short trip filling in forms - which were ultimately surveyed by a surly, uninterested immigration official.

After the immigration and baggage formalities we changed money and were met in the Arrivals Hall by Mr Kai from our Travel Agency (Onda Travel) who, with two other "mates" drove us to the Vien Dong Hotel in a full-size bus. Yes, a huge bus for the five of us!

The Vien Dong is semi-ritzy and we have a room overlooking the verdant central courtyard. Our room even has air conditioning and a TV. We're not used to such luxury and suspected a mistake, but we very quickly acted as if we belonged and, after a quick orientation of the room - and a quick sorting out of a mix-up with the room numbers - we were soon back on the huge bus...

Firstly to the Jade Emperor Pagoda, with its sacred turtles, elaborately carved ebony scenes of Heaven and Hell, and the beggars in the courtyard. Then off to Notre Dame (yes, that's right!), alongside the ornate Post Office. We're quite used to negotiating "Third World" traffic by now (ie, slowly, slowly), but are struck by the orderliness of the flows here - compared with, say, Egypt. Here there are many more motorbikes than cars... calm, elegant women cruising purposefully alongside the ever-patient pedal-powered tricycles. And, surprisingly, much less horn tooting than we had become used to.

Then off to the Ban Thanh Market where we splurged on a bottle of water, marvelled at the array of goods and were bemused at the variety and extent of the "live" produce - eels, chickens, fish, squid, snakes, insects. You name it, they appear to eat it!

Then on to the Mariamman Hindu Temple where I was politely reminded to remove my shoes. Back to the bus, past increasingly dodgy wiring dangling haphazardly over vehicles and pedestrians alike. While stuck for a while in traffic we observed shops full of snake wine and kids eating live chicks still in the egg. Back to the hotel for a much needed rest.

We then walked towards the river... only to encounter a raging torrent of motorcycles parading around the town centre - apparently in celebration of the 25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of Liberation from America. Joining the unending throng were colourful floats, leaving no doubt as to the purpose of the celebration.

We had many opportunities to practice our road crossing technique before arriving at one of the many floating restaurants. Five minutes later, after perusing the unappetising menu, we left. Eventually we settled on a riverside restaurant, ate well (to the accompanying karaoke) and then wended our way back to the hotel.

There are florists aplenty, all with the most stunning floral arrangements... highly artistic and often including roses which we have never seen before in Asia. It appears that most of these beautiful flowers are grown in Dalat which we intend to visit later in our journey. We also noted with interest that most of the vegetables and some of the fruit was actually recognisable to us. And the dreaded Durian was everywhere.

### **Day 3: Mon 1/5/2000**

After a good night's sleep in our airconditioned room we met the others for a breakfast of fruit, aromatic tea and French bread. Then off with Ki in two cars to the Cholon Markets... only to find them closed because it was May Day! So we headed off through the bustling streets to visit two Chinese temples - the first dedicated to the Goddess of the Sea. The second, larger temple was crammed full of mysterious images shrouded in clouds of incense smoke.

We spent some time wandering the nearby streets and the local produce market, buying a couple of oranges and dragon fruit. In the midst of all the overwhelming smells and humanity we found ourselves stepping over a poor beggar with no arms or legs, as he nonchalantly slid himself beneath the stalls as he lay on his back on a pitiful trolley that resembled a skateboard. This was his life.

Back into our airconditioned cars, off to the War Remnants Museum where the Vietnamese get to tell their side of the story of the war with America. Clearly there were atrocities on every side. How stupid is war? How unbelievably stupid was this war?

Back to the hotel for lunch at Kim's Cafe (at last, a banana pancake!) then a rapid sock and undies wash before walking through the 35 degree heat to the "Culture Gardens" to see the remnants of the weekend's celebrations and the remains of French rule - namely a swimming pool and a pavilion built in the "French Style".

Back by a cyclos ("five people, five cyclos!") to the hotel for some "cool" conversation and postcard writing. Later we head to a nearby hotel for a \$7 buffet meal consisting of "interesting" food that we often found difficult to identify. Afterwards, an evening stroll to observe the motorcycle "parade" before falling into bed.

### **Day 4: Tue 2/5/2000**

A big thunderstorm last night. Breakfasted with a gaggle of newly arrived French. We met our new guide (Son) and at 8:30 we left for the Cao Dai Temple, after a brief stop at the Post Office to mail our postcards.

The traffic to the Temple was simply horrendous but surprisingly "orderly"... each "molecule" of traffic seemingly programmed to look after itself and avoid others as it joins the flow or crosses the flow of other molecules. We encountered our first trucks as we ventured further into the countryside... now there's and experience... It became a real challenge fitting a truck, our mini-bus, half a dozen motorbikes, a couple of pushbikes and an assortment of pedestrians across a road little wider than our driveway! And there am I, with a spasming back, on roads showing little improvement on

the track to Cape York. We are thankful that despite their obvious desires, no-one can actually drive very fast!

We arrived at Cao Dai at 11:30, with an understanding that a ceremony would begin at midday. The Temple appears to us to be constructed in an early "Fantasy-Land" style - extremely ornate and colourful. The deities that they worship here appear to be Buddha, Jesus and, surprisingly, Victor Hugo! We watched the ceremony from on high - unfortunately from the side of the temple where the non-functioning fans saw the temperature skyrocket. The ceremony was serene and hypnotic with the worshippers in robes of various colours, and spending much of the time "meditating" to the repetitive chanting of the choir.

With my spasming back now "fixed" (was it Mr Son's mysterious green lineament or perhaps the temple visit?) we trundled off to lunch at a roadside cafe. Then another hour and a half to the CuChi tunnels. At Cu Chi we witnessed a well-rehearsed presentation by Son, a blatant North Vietnamese propaganda film and displays of some of the gruesome weaponry employed by the Viet Cong. We then burrowed our way through a hundred metres of tunnel, specially widened for Westerners... a hot, sweaty, anxious few minutes which gave us a very limited taste of the terror the VC must have felt.

Then back through the traffic, which was by now even more horrendous than earlier, to re-hydrate, rejuvenate and dine at Kim's Cafe, rewarding our adventurous day with a banana pancake (or two).

A slow amble through the cool of the evening, purchasing a few gifts for those at home, and back to the hotel for a welcome shower and bed.

### ***Day 5: Wed 3/5/2000***

After an early breakfast, photo drop-off and money change we piled into yesterday's mini-bus with yesterday's driver (Mr Jung) at the wheel, and our new guide, the self-described "famous" Mr Hai ("the fat one").

First stop, Mr Hai's house in the suburbs of Saigon, to be proudly introduced to his wife and two sons - one of whom appeared to be recovering from a debilitating motorcycle accident.

Then a VERY slow trip to the Mekong Delta region. Very slow, mainly because of the traffic and the narrow roads. The gridlock that had been threatening many times before actually occurred this time... with a T-intersection totally blocked with all sorts of traffic, triggering the first real display of anger and frustration that we have seen. Once cleared (God knows how!) we continued heading south, down the French built / American upgraded Highway One. Past the rich alluvial plains of the Delta where rice

is by far the most common plant, but certainly not the only one grown... cashew nuts, coconuts, pawpaw, mango, tapioca, lotus also grow in abundance. Most of the villages we pass appear to be barely beyond subsistence - but at least they can eat off the land quite successfully. Or they could if only there weren't so many of them! Apparently this is one of the most densely populated areas on the planet!

We ate lunch at a roadside cafe, after which we clambered aboard a long-tail boat for a very loud 45 minute trip down several of the numerous canals that criss-cross the Delta. We eventually arrived at the remnants of what was once a Communist Headquarters - complete with bunkers, conference huts, etc. It was hardly discernable from the surrounding jungle and quite salutary to imagine the lives of those poor soldiers - on both sides - as they fought in these intolerable conditions.

Back to Highway One where we crossed the Upper Mekong on a car ferry from which we could see the huge suspension bridge built with Australian money and by Australian engineers, which is just about ready to replace the busy fleet of car ferries.

At the village on the Upper Mekong's southern shore we visited a food market, astounded by the variety of exotic foods... rats, snakes, frogs, etc. The threatening darkness of the skies soon made good their threat with a tropical downpour, causing us to flee to our van. But not before we had sampled mangosteen (delicious) and, of course, the dreaded Durian (awful, as expected!).

Through the lightning and heavy rain we eventually reached the ferry crossing for the Lower Mekong river, only to join the long queue waiting for the ferries to begin running again, after having stopped while the storm passed.

At 7:30 we eventually arrive at Can Tho, the capital city of the Mekong Delta. We checked into our "government run" hotel before dining on chicken, snake and several other unidentifiable foods for dinner before turning in, accompanied by the sounds of a spluttering airconditioner competing with the constant stream of raucous motorboats that appeared to be processing just outside our window.

### ***Day 6: Thu 4/5.2000***

Up at the crack of dawn, awoken not by the anticipated "political songs" but by the increased volume offered by the unmuffled motors on the passing boats. After breakfasting in the very picturesque restaurant, overlooking the river, we drove to the jetty where we sat in the welcome shade while Mr Hai anxiously arranged for a boat - apparently the previously booked boat had

broken down. Eventually Mr Hai succeeded in his negotiations and we boarded another long-tail boat and headed off up the Can Toh river. Our first stop was the Can Toh floating markets where numerous craft of different sizes and propulsion (but, strangely, all of the same drab grey colour) milled around, selling and buying from each other.

Then off to a minor tributary canal to see a rice-noodle "factory" ... certainly not on the scale I imagined... mostly done by hand and dried in the sun. Like stepping back into the pre-industrial age!

Then further up the increasingly muddy and narrowing canal, through lush coconut-palm greenness, where villages indecipherably together into a narrow ribbon of human activity, to a particular village where we clambered ashore up the muddy, steep bank. Here Hai explained the numerous aspects of village life to us... the rice-growing cycle, for example, where the soil here is so rich that farmers sow it from seed, not transplanted like it is in the North. Hai also explained the numerous fruits, the traditional houses, marital fidelity, etc. Some of the smaller children are very friendly, others almost hostile. It is difficult to imagine what they must think of us invading their privacy like this.

Back by boat to Can Toh then lunch at a roadside restaurant where we had a python wrapped around our necks, and where we were joined by Hai's sick sister, needing to go to Saigon for treatment. Then back to Saigon via the two car ferries - where we had to be ever watchful of the hordes of children blatantly attempting to pick-pocket the tourists. After several photo-opportunity stops, another tropical rainstorm, witnessing two awful accidents (one where a fully-laden bus had overturned into a roadside ditch), flooded roads where the sewerage works clearly weren't working, a mid-afternoon siesta in a hammock, and the usual Saigon traffic, we arrived back at the Vien Dong Hotel at 6pm. Here we did a little washing, picked up some of our photos, wrote this diary and enjoyed a dinner of lemongrass chicken and banana pancake. Picked up the rest of our photos then fell into bed.

### ***Day 7: Fri 5/5/2000***

Up early for the promised 8am start - which we eventually discovered has been delayed until 10:15, when we'll be picked up for the 11am train to Nha Trang. We filled in those bonus couple of hours with a slow walk through the beautiful nearby market where I splurged on a pen-knife and we all bought fruit, etc. for the train trip. Saw a poor beggar without the use of both legs and one arm, crawling on his back in the gutter beside the never-ending traffic. I felt simultaneously shocked, helpless and fortunate.

Victualled and relaxed, we finally headed off to the railway station - which, having only one platform, was not easy to get lost in! We boarded our A-

Class carriage and settled in for a 10-hour trip. Not long after leaving the bustle of Saigon we entered countryside not unlike parts of Australia... relatively arid and hilly - the only difference being that every square metre that can be used to grow something is used... dragon fruit, sugar cane, grapes... all sorts of crops appear to be grown here. The country is noticeably poorer and vastly less populous than in the South.

With the open windows the trip was very noisy, gritty and, when the inevitable afternoon rainstorm arrived, wet. There were only four other Westerners aboard and to pass the time we all swapped travel stories. We arrived in Nha Trang right on time (8:30) and were whisked away to our very swank hotel which was also called Vien Dong (meaning Far East). We were welcomed with ice cold coconut milk but we were all too buggered to care as we dragged ourselves off to our rooms for showers and sleeep...

### **Day 8: Sat 6/5/2000**

A great sleep, despite the brick-like pillows. After the usual breakfast of omelettes, fruit, bread and tea we were off to the Nha Trang jetty where we navigated our way through the beggars and hawkers to a converted fishing boat which was to take us on our "cruise". We chugged out into Nha Trang Bay, weaving our way around several small islands. Our first stop was near caves, heavily guarded to protect their precious contents - bird nests! Here we swam in the warm, crystalline waters. The coral, however, was very disappointing, with nary a fish to be seen, clearly due to the vast numbers of fishing boats which drag their nets along the sea floor, scooping up everything in their path. So sad!

We then chugged across the billiard-table-smooth bay to our lunch stop, where I foolishly leapt into the far-too-inviting water with my glasses on. And promptly lost them to the considerable depths. A couple of the crew members spent 20 or 30 minutes diving for them, but to no avail.

We then moved on to a nearby "tourist" beach, meeting up with about six other boats with similar intentions. Every boat seemed to be trying to outdo the others with heavily distorted loud music accompanied by the equally loud and distorted attempts at singing by increasingly drunken "tourists". Our boatload joined in the raucous cacophony with a post-lunch "concert" given by our extrovert crew - even, at one stage, bursting into a chorus of Waltzing Matilda!

Back to the jetty, a swim in the hotel pool, a shower, then off into town to see about a new pair of glasses... a task which was surprisingly achieved in less than an hour! Amid great hilarity, a hairy ride on the back of a motorcycle to the bank, and super-efficiency on the part of the spectacle-makers, I ended up

with not one but two pairs (one for distance, one for reading) for a total cost of \$150Aus. Unbelievable!

We wound our way back to the hotel via the beachside promenade. We are all very impressed with this clean, friendly little town. After a delicious meal of tuna and chips we crashed into bed, sunburnt but content!

### ***Day 9: Sun 7/5/2000***

The usual breakfast. The usual 8am departure time. Off we went in a medium-sized diesel bus to the Pasteur Institute only to discover that, being Sunday, it was closed! We drove on to the huge Buddha statue that overlooks the town, erected in honour of the various monks who self-immolated in protest at the war.

Then on to the partly reconstructed Cham towers north of the town. Here we encountered a group of "Cham people" in their "Sunday best". The towers themselves reminded us of the Ayuttayah in Thailand.

Then we headed further north past some of the most beautiful coastal scenery we have ever seen! Rice paddies fringed by coconut palms, with a backdrop of craggy mountains on one side of the road and crystalline waters gently lapping white sands or colourful little fishing villages on the other. Sixteen million people, apparently, live along this highway... We saw shrimp farming, fishing, salt manufacturing, sugar cane farming, horse-drawn drays, bullocks drawing ploughs, every conceivable type of vehicle carrying every conceivable type of stuff!

We lunched at the most beautiful spot - right on a palm-fringed beach where a small river entered the azure sea. Just heavenly. We met a young man whose family ran the restaurant and who was keen to practice his English. Great fun!

Many kilometres and photographs later we arrived at Qui Nohn, all very tired but thrilled at the day's experiences. We checked into the Seagull Hotel (yes, it's really called that) then walked along the beach where most of the town's inhabitants seemed to be enjoying themselves swimming and playing beach soccer. After a lively dinnertime conversation we hit the sack...

### ***A few "ecological" observations:***

1. There appear to be very few birds in Vietnam. We saw a few swifts nesting in Saigon, a few egrets in rice-paddies but have neither seen nor heard many others.

2. The coral was almost non-existent with hardly any fish. And what fish we did see were very small.
3. The only animal we have seen so far that is NOT eaten is the giant millipedes we saw in the Mekong Delta. Everything else is either eaten or fed to the pigs - to be eaten in turn!
4. Many animals are treated "cruelly", at least by our standards. Example are the killing of chickens, the skinning and beheading of frogs and snakes, keeping fish and eels alive in shallow pans, cooping sun-bears up in cages, packing live reptiles into boxes, transporting pigs, chickens, ducks alive on motorbikes.
5. While introducing Hai to the toy koala we gave him his only question was "What does it taste like?".
6. We have seen several dogs that appear to be kept as pets rather than for dinner - mainly well-looked after King Charles Spaniels and similar.
7. We have encountered very few flies, mosquitoes and other insects.

### ***Day 10: Mon 8/5/2000***

From Qui Nohn we made our way back onto Highway One. Close to the town were several Cham towers being rebuilt rather than conserved. The intention is to turn them into a tourist attraction. A bit sad, really. Heading north, the road doesn't follow the coast but winds its way through rice paddies, sugar cane and salt works. We made lots of photo stops, probably to the increasing annoyance of our driver. Here in the north they replant their rice because their paddies are smaller and they can get a similar yield to that achieved in the Delta where they sow the rice and don't replant. Because of the "Green Revolution" which saw better rice varieties and superphosphate become more available, most farmers in Vietnam are now able to grow three crops of rice in a year.

We stopped to watch people threshing the rice with an electric thresher with large wire loops, and then skillfully separating the rice husks using large cane baskets and the wind. It was here that we also saw the "duck man" herding about 200 ducks with nothing more than a plastic bag on a long stick, which they obediently follow. The ducks diligently clear the rice paddies of snails and insects, providing fertilizer as they do so.

Later in the day we stopped at a monument erected to commemorate a battle... a typical communist propaganda statue depicting the triumphant victors. We duly arrived at our 3 star hotel in Hoi An. Unexpectedly, it even has a swimming pool. What luxury!

### ***Things we've seen on motorbikes:***

Up to six people, pigs in baskets, even a small cow in a basket, haystacks, ice, assorted building materials (doors, panes of glass, long timbers), bamboo, sugar cane, bags of rice, a sleeping baby sideways across its mother's lap, children standing on the seat, wedged between its parents, gas cylinders, Chickens draped by their feet over the handlebars...

### ***Day 11: Tue 9/5/2000***

Another great breakfast. Off on foot with Hai in the lead to explore the old town area of Hoi An. First stop was a silk and woodcarving store where we observed various artisans at work... carving, embroidering, weaving silk, cotton and even grass.

Next stop was the "Japanese Bridge", a very old structure said to "disempower" some giant mythological monster. Then on to the Tan Ky house, a 200 year old trader's house made of black iron-wood and flooded annually due to its close proximity to the river. On our way there, and at the house itself, we were always being urged - albeit gently - to buy stuff. We mostly, gently, resisted.

Then on to another old house (Hoi An's old centre is World Heritage listed) where we also drank tea and listened attentively to the story of the house, told by a young descendent of the original builder. This house was built of Jackfruit timber and had a unique architecture.

Next, off to the Assembly Hall of the Cantonese Chinese Congregation, built in 1786. Then to the Assembly Hall of the Fujian Chinese Congregation, dedicated to the Goddess of the Sea. And there she was, flanked by her two helpers - one of whom, we were told, could hear for 100 kilometres while the other could see for a similar distance. Pretty impressive!

Then we visited the Tran Family chapel where the resident descendent of the original builder (a Mandarin) was very enthusiastic and informative, not just about the building, but about aspects of Confucianism and Buddhism as well.

Lastly, Hai led us down a number of back alleys to view a 1,000 year old well where the Cham people drew the "special" water to use in producing the region's special noodle dish (Cam Lau).

At 1pm Hai left us to "do our own thing". My particular "thing" was to make a hurried return to the hotel to sit on a loo for a while - yes, I have the runs. Relieved, but not necessarily recovered, I joined the others for lunch at The

Mermaid after which we all agreed that it was just too hot to shop or walk so we trundled back to the toilet (oops, hotel) for a short siesta.

Around 4pm we headed once more to the silk store where Glenys and Liz were fitted for silk suits and blouses. Then off to the woodcarvers where I bought a small carved screen. After a few more purchases (paintings, cards, etc.) we all met up and walked through the colourful lantern-lit streets to the riverbank where we selected one from the multitude of restaurants to have dinner. A slow amble back through the relative cool of the evening to crash into bed for a rewarding sleep.

### **Day 12: Wed 10/5/2000**

Another early start. After breakfast we set off to wander around the markets... a vibrant, colourful place with a wide variety of "interesting" smells. We sampled Jackfruit... not so keen on it. Then off to the old "French Section" with its colourful, albeit somewhat faded, colonial architecture. We passed a large, noisy factory crammed with women weaving silk and cotton. Then, after much negotiation and argument about the price, by small boat across to an island in the middle of the wide river, where they carve wooden statues, mill wood and build wooden boats - both big (fishing trawlers) and small (sampan). It was impressive to see the traditional building methods with no nails, electrical tools or fibreglass.

Back by boat to the Hoi An jetty, then by bus from the hotel to the beach, some 5 kilometres away. At last we found ourselves at a "regular" beach... with white sand and proper waves (well, sort of). After we had run the gauntlet of kids selling drinks, pineapple and chairs in the shade, we set ourselves up "Aussie-style" by plonking our towels on the sand and leaping enthusiastically into the small, confused surf. Ahhh, it was so refreshing after the warmth of the hotel's pool. Once refreshed we again ran the gauntlet of hawkers and waited in the welcome shade for Hai's return in the bus. He duly took us back to the hotel where we collapsed into the pool and, just as we were debating where we should eat lunch, a waitress appeared offering to serve us lunch where we sat. What luxury!

Post-lunch, we retired to our rooms for the usual diary catch-up, a bit of a read, and a mini-siesta.

4pm saw us refreshed and heading down Le Loi Street to pick up our various tailored suits, etc. They all looked terrific and so elegant. All transactions were completed with much good humour and skill. Then off to the markets once more with a young girl called Hoa, whom we had met yesterday. She gave us the usual spiel of impoverished family, etc. But delivered it with such sincerity and charm that we just couldn't resist. What followed was a chaotic afternoon of hilarious interactions between reluctant customers (us) and

persistent sellers (her family). Only Glenys was able to withstand the onslaught. I bought a beautiful kimono (suitably altered on-the-spot) for \$18, while Liz, Nic and Vera bought various shirts, blouses, etc. Vera even relented to a facial for \$1. Hoa was so enticingly charming that we even exchanged addresses with the promise of writing. I wonder if we ever will?

Happy with our respective purchases we dined by the riverside then back through the drizzle to the hotel for a very welcome sleep.

### ***Day 13: Thu 11/5/2000***

We were all packed and out of the hotel by 8:30. Our first stop was the "Marble Mountain" up which we clambered in the heat. Inside its limestone caves are ancient Cham altars, more recent Buddhas and temples of all sorts - including a strikingly beautiful one dedicated to the Goddess of Mercy, floating on a pond full of carp.

Inside one smoke-filled cavern we heard how it was a Viet Cong hospital which took a direct hit from a B52 bomb in 1972, giving the streams of light penetrating through the ceiling a more auspicious feeling!

We literally climbed our way to the very top of the mountain from where we could see four other similar limestone outcrops - each representing one of the five elements of Buddhism - Earth, Fire, Water, Metal and Wood. Back at the foot of the mountain we watched with admiration as skilled craftsmen converted great lumps of marble into unbelievably intricate statues. We all bought a few souvenirs before heading north once more... up and over the highest, longest pass in Vietnam, linking Da Nang with Hue.

In Da Nang we visited the Cham Museum where we enthusiastically examined artefacts and remnants of the ancient Cham Dynasty. We were especially taken by the huge phallic symbols called Lingas. After a brief detour into Da Nang for Liz to buy a T-shirt, we continued on our way. The 21 kilometres of pass took us over an hour to negotiate... the hairpin bends, washaways, landslides and broken-down buses and trucks providing us with a somewhat dangerous obstacle course. Unfortunately, the view from the top of the pass was obscured by heavy mist, but the rest of the journey was most picturesque.

Just before venturing up the pass we had detoured to China Beach. This proved to be nothing special except for its evocative name, its historical significance and the fact that it proved to be the closest thing to "surf" that we have yet seen.

We lunched at the northern end of the pass, at a beautiful little beach, then proceeded on to Hue. En route we saw a number of trucks full of yelping,

terrified dogs, all heading north. The dogs we were told, are to be eaten. This was a very disturbing sight to see.

Eventually, at 6pm, we arrived at the Huong Giang Villa Hotel. After checking in we did our usual thing and wandered the streets looking for somewhere to eat. With too many restaurants on offer we chose one, had a beaut meal and meandered around the cooling streets until 9:30. We crossed an old French-built bridge twice. On our second crossing we met a very extroverted woman who told us she was “helping Vietnam with its infrastructure”. She is here for three years building roads and gutters and appears to get a real thrill out of the immense challenges such a task must require.

Back to the hotel for a well-earned sleep...

### **Day 14: Fri 12/5/2000**

Half way through our trip!

Another beaut breakfast then a short walk to the jetty where we boarded a “dragon boat”. This was a 30 foot long, 4 foot wide longboat, with a carved dragon head on the bow and a dragon’s tail at the stern. We headed up the Perfume River to the Thien Mu Pagoda. This river is barely muddy - unlike every other Vietnamese river we’ve seen so far. Furthermore, its shorelines are quite verdant and you could almost call them “tidy”! The major activity on the river seems to be dredging the sand and gravel - mostly by hand - and shipping it downstream for use in construction.

The Thien Mu Pagoda is situated on a bend in the river. It has been rebuilt many times but still manages to look exceedingly old. Everything here, except for the people, seems to age so rapidly in the incessant humidity and heat. In the temple we observed monks chanting while we examined the blue Austin car driven to Saigon by the monk who so famously self-immolated in a Saigon street in protest at the war. The gardens here were marvellous and the whole place exuded a sense of peaceful co-existence.

Back aboard the boat, we headed West once more. Next stop was the tomb of an early emperor, Minh Mang. This was truly superb - with a fully restored red and gold (what else?) building at it’s heart, and lots of restoration work going on all around. Glenys was so impressed that she stole a small piece of old pottery!

Then we headed off to the Tu Doc tomb... a 2 kilometre walk, following a winding bush track inland from the river. On the track near the entrance to the tomb we passed through a village which specialised in making incense sticks. The task of expertly rolling the incense mixture onto the bamboo sticks

was mainly done by young girls, some of whom were only 6 years old. We couldn't help but compare their childhood with those of our own privileged and pampered childhoods!

The heavens opened just as we reached the gate of the Tu Doc tomb. Was this some sort of portent, perhaps? We waited for some abatement in a nearby kiosk. After ten minutes we could wait no longer so we donned our flimsy rain gear and set about exploring the ruins. What an incredibly beautiful place this is (and, undoubtedly, was). What decadence. What luxury. All that over-eating and over-indulging in concubines must have been viewed with disdain by the "peasants". We even "performed" in the 140 year old "theatre".

Back by boat for the trip "home", interrupted only by a "forced" detour to drop off a hitch-hiking policeman. After a quick walk around a few blocks of the city we luxuriated on tea and cakes in our foyer before freshening up and heading off to dine at the incredibly opulent Huong Giang hotel... where we had our most expensive meal so far... \$6 each! A stroll back through the gentle coolth of the evening sea breeze and we were in bed by 10.

### **Day 15: Sat 13/5/2000**

It was Liz's turn to succumb to "Vietnam belly" and she wisely decided not to venture too far from her toilet. The rest of us trundled off at 8am to The Citadel. This is a huge complex of 100 buildings enclosed by a 10 kilometre long wall and moat, built and modified by the various Emperors throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20 Centuries. Most of it was destroyed in 1947 during the Franco-Vietnamese War and much of what was left was destroyed in 1968. However, much international effort is assisting the continued restoration of a number of the more significant buildings.

We imagined the glories of "former times" as we visited the Phoenix Belvedere, the Halls of the Mandarins, the Purple City, the Nine Dynastic Urns, the Nine Holy Cannons and the Royal Library. The most informative, however, had to be the partly restored Temple where the ancestral emperors were worshipped... each of the 13 past emperors has their own little shrine, complete with fading picture or photograph. Hai was able to tell us their stories, which, apart from the names, sound like the stories from any royal family: treachery, debauchery, abuse of power and wealth. We learnt of the good ones, the homosexual one, the infertile one, the ones with inordinate numbers of concubines and those who attempted reform. Many of them were chosen as children by the French to serve as puppet rulers, with most of the real decision-making being done by the Mandarins and the military. Whilst there we met an 82 year old French-speaking old gent and a 70 year old ex-nurse selling bamboo flutes.

Leaving the Citadel we attempted to find a lacquer-ware factory but when we eventually located it we discovered that it was the workers' day off, so no luck there. We were eventually dropped off at the Hue markets where we were so hassled by the persistent, pesky vendors and beggars that we left soon after, bought a T-shirt at a nearby store and walked back to the hotel across the Five-Arch French bridge.

Still without Liz, we lunched nearby and retreated to the hotel for our daily siesta. Later in the afternoon Glenny and I ventured forth on what proved to be a fruitless search for an open bank - we needed to exchange a couple of travellers' cheques. We later rejoined Vera and Nic at 6pm for dinner. We found an empty restaurant down a back street and asked to see the menu. A red one was produced. It appeared to be rather expensive so we began to leave. Magically a blue menu appeared and was offered to us... same food, half the price! So we chose to stay - and were glad we did... the food was fabulous, served to us by no fewer than six waiters, cooked by three chefs... and we were still the only ones in the restaurant!

Post-dinner we walked through the drizzle to a tea-shop called "Dilmah, a New World of Tea" which serves nothing but 25 different blends of, you guessed it, Dilmah Tea. Judging by the clientele of young Hueians, this was obviously the "hip" place to be seen!

Back to the hotel to sleep... another early start tomorrow...

### **Day 16: Sun 14/5/2000**

Up at 5:30. Early breakfast, then off to the airport. Liz is feeling a little better but still not eating much. The airport is very small with only one flight registering on the board... so it would be difficult to lose our luggage! We were bussed the 50 metres to the plane, a brand new Airbus. The trip was very smooth - we left and arrived right on schedule and were even fed on the way.

A slight mixup at the airport (Sinh Cafe - our tour agency - had neglected to pick us up) saw us spend more time at the airport than in the air! However, we were soon zooming down the brand new six lane superhighway towards Hanoi. Of course, we encountered the usual traffic chaos as we neared the central districts. We checked into our hotel (The Camellia) and trekked our way up the steep staircase to our spacious rooms (there is no lift).

We had lunch at the local "Love Planet" cafe then an "orientation walk" with Hai, checking out all the landmarks (PO, Police Station, Government Guest House, ANZ Bank, etc.) as well as the temple on an island in the middle of the local picturesque lake. We also purchased tickets to this evening's

performance of the Water Puppets - which was supposed to be tomorrow, but Hai got the date wrong.

Back to the hotel for a quick siesta, then off to the show... and it was just brilliant. Vivid colours, non-stop action, great music and singing. Quite something. Afterwards we walked to the "Cyclo Bar" for a splurge on an expensive meal, followed by a walk through the rain back to our hotel to rest our weary legs...

### ***Hanoi Observations***

Cyclos wider and shinier. Beggars numerous and persistent. Street vendors VERY persistent... standing in your way, touching, grabbing, pinching, then chastising you for not buying. Main streets wider, secondary streets narrower. Traffic faster with more aggressive riders/drivers. French architecture much more obvious. Some major capital works (Airport Road, Hanoi Hilton, etc) are very "modern". There are numerous "Department Stores". Money Changers on the street working out of suitcases. Sidewalk barbers with just a chair and a mirror. Groups of vociferous men playing Chinese Chess on the sidewalks. Women struggling under the weight of baskets carried on bamboo poles laid across their shoulders. "Political Messages" broadcast in monotonous tones over distorted loudspeakers. Women with baskets of food in hessian bags balanced precariously on their heads.

### ***Day 17: Mon 15/5/2000***

Another minor mix-up with the Sinh mini-bus meant that we left around 8:30 by mini-taxi, after the usual buffet breakfast. We drove right around the 13 kilometre circumference of the West Lake. We had some lovely views of the lake but also several near-death traffic experiences. We observed a few specialist dog-eating restaurants and a wide variety of architecture. Also, much dyke building, aiming to keep the devastating annual flooding at bay.

Back into town to visit the "Hanoi Hilton" prison where we winced at the cruelties that humans can inflict on fellow humans. Each gruesome display was accompanied by propaganda-ridden explanatory labels. Then off to the snake rearing and eating precinct... we knew as we approached it because young men on motorbikes thrust their "business cards" through the Taxi's windows! At the first stop we were shown a small cobra and were invited to drink snake wine - we declined. At the second stop we witnessed the killing and gutting of a large cobra, popping open its neck and inserting him into a large jar for rice wine to be added later. The poor cobra, we were told, was over 70 years old. We were then invited upstairs to view more caged snakes and to (reluctantly) witness the killing of another small cobra. This one was killed right there in their small restaurant, in front of an obviously wealthy

man and his girlfriend who enthusiastically drank its blood and gall, and then proceeded to eat the still beating heart. ECCCHH!!

As if that wasn't enough, back downstairs we saw them skinning snakes alive and discovered mongooses and porcupine in cages, and a distressed looking monkey chained to the door, all ready to be ordered for lunch! It was hard not to be shocked by the disregard for fellow creatures and the unnecessary cruelty in the way the poor animals were treated.

Back to the hotel where we went our separate ways seeking our own lunch... no wild animals on our menus! I sent an email to work and dropped off a film for development, then back to the hotel for a siesta and to try and process the morning's experiences.

3PM found us heading off on a Lonely-Planet-recommended walk around the Old Quarter. Down streets named for their major "speciality" in former times, much of which still persists... clothes, towels, tin, blacksmiths, leather, worshipping, paper, jewelry, memorials. Etc. Walking slowly, dodging traffic, people, broken gutters, etc. In 30 degree heat and 80% humidity really tested our stamina - although it was only 5 kilometres, it really felt much further! Back to the hotel to put our feet up then, at 6:30, off to dinner at the nearby Gallery Cafe. Great meal - even though it took an inordinately long time (our theory is that they have only one-burner stoves). Then off to bed for another early start tomorrow.

### ***Day 18: Tue 16/5/2000***

Up early. Beaut breakfast. We left our luggage behind and only took our backpacks with us. By minibus to Halong City, mostly along a modern 4 to 6 lane highway but still having to dodge buffalo, pedestrians, bikes, etc, many of which saw no problem with travelling the wrong way down the road. Closer to Halong City we "enjoyed" a more bumpy ride over those parts of the road still being rebuilt. On the way we stopped off at an embroidery "factory" where most of the workers were kids with various disabilities or were orphans - or both. The embroidery they were doing was simply spectacular - evocative images that looked as detailed as a photograph. Quite expensive, though.

At Halong City we boarded a medium-sized ex-fishing boat and, after being nearly crushed by a 16 foot wide boat attempting to squeeze into a 4 foot gap, we chugged our way slowly out into Halong Bay. Halong Bay is truly a magnificent sight... rugged fingers of craggy limestone jutting vertically from the smooth waters of the Bay... each with a unique shape and size. Each offering evocative glimpses of numerous caves, many of which, apparently, remaining unexplored.

We stopped at a small island and explored two of its caves... one of which was only discovered seven years ago, called The Heavenly Palace, and the other, more open cave, Dau Go, the wooden stakes grotto. The emphasis in both is seeing mythology and imaginary animals in the formations, emphasised by coloured lights and fake water features. It certainly is not Geology!

We were served a magnificent seafood lunch on board by a skipper who resembles a renegade pirate. At one stage a smaller boat pulled alongside and its crew - a young girl - boarded us trying to sell us food, as we continued chugging along.

At 5pm we duly arrived at Cat Ba Island, five and a half hours after leaving Halong City. Unfortunately we appeared to have landed on the wrong side of the island so we set off in the heat, walking to the other side. After about one kilometre we realised that we would have another three kilometres to go, so we hailed a few of the plentiful motorbikes and completed the journey in style! The old Russian bike that Vera was on barely made it up the hill.

After a minor relocation we eventually booked into the Huang Dong Hotel right in the Main Street (well, the only street) of Cat Ba. Here we luxuriated in our airconditioned room until dinner at 6:30. We seemed to have an enormous choice of restaurants - almost every second building in the street is a restaurant and/or a hotel. The street looks out on a beautiful harbour, glimpsed through a tree-lined promenade. Many of the tall buildings lining the other side of the street seem to meld imperceptibly into the grey limestone cliffs behind them. The evening was balmy, the town colourfully lit and everyone seemed to be parading up and down the street, watching everyone else doing the same. We preferred to watch the lights on the numerous boats moored in the harbour, reflect on the smooth, dark waters. We spent some time on the hotel balcony mesmerised by this view until a tremendous tiredness overtook us...

### ***Day 19: Wed 17/5/2000***

Yay, we got to sleep in until 6:30! After breakfast we took a leisurely walk through the drizzling rain to the market, then through the narrow alley that almost encircles a small harbour within the main harbour. This walk gave us a bit of insight into the everyday lives of the Cat Ba inhabitants. TV appears to play a large part in their lives regardless of the apparent level of impoverishment! We negotiated a ride in an elongated coracle in order to complete our circumnavigation of the harbour. These boats are the most common form of "shuttle service" in Cat Ba and it quite easily took the five of us and the rower.

Once back on the not-so-dry land we continued our walk eastwards through a large cutting to view the beach where we had intended to swim if it weren't raining. Back for an early lunch outside our hotel then, at midday, we once more straddled the motorbikes which then skidded their way through the building rain to our boat.

We amused ourselves on the four hour boat trip by playing "Eye Spy", "Charades" and "Creepum-Crawlums". We looked up occasionally to view the awesome spectacle of Halong Bay shrouded in mist. Once again we were visited by the aquatic hawkers appearing like ghost-ships through the mist and rain. We bought some peanut brittle.

During this part of our trip I learnt a little more of Hai's life... how, for example, he had twice attempted escape by boat, how the government had confiscated most of his family's considerable assets, how he lost three fingers in a sawmill accident, etc.

Yet another mix-up with our driver saw us waiting on the Halong City wharf for over an hour. Eventually, however, we arrived at our hotel perched on the hill which overlooks the small town. Our room actually has the most magnificent view of the town and the Bay beyond.

After our usual relax and siesta we walked into town through the drizzle, along the man-made beaches where we grabbed dinner in a small restaurant before we caught a taxi back to the hotel, hoping that the weather will clear tomorrow to reveal more of that view!

### ***Day 20: Thu 18/5/2000***

Awoken at 5:30 by Reville being played at a nearby army bas. Awoken again at 6:00 by a highly distorted "political message" being played at full volume on a loudspeaker that feels as if it is right outside our room. We had a beat shower in an inordinately huge bathroom. Unfortunately it was still misty outside, so no "postcard" views of the Bay. After breakfast we're off to Han Gai island via a vehicular ferry - not quite as chaotic as the car ferry in the Mekong Delta. It was quite a pleasant trip, actually. We were particularly impressed at how skillfully the ferry drivers negotiated the swift currents.

Han Gai's main export is coal and there were many large ships moored offshore. Our first stop on this mountainous island was at a temple which was as impressive as it was well-used. Next stop, the market which was pleasant to walk around unmolested by beggars or persistent vendors. This is not a "tourist" market. We spent an hour or so just walking around the numerous stores. We bought fruit and bread for lunch. My hairy legs protruding from beneath my lime green poncho proved to be a source of some amusement for the locals.

Back in the bus we did a quick circuit of the town, then back across the Bay, heading westwards towards Hanoi. The previously “bumpy” section of the road had now become a quagmire - but the presence of a few inconvenient mud-puddles doesn’t seem to modify the manic driving habits at all. But the fact that I am writing these words proved that none of the numerous near-death experiences became actual-death experiences!

Along the way we made two stops - first at a pottery factory where, even though everyone was at lunch we were able to wander at will around the factory, happily inspecting the moulds, drying areas, kilns, etc. Some of the painters were still at work and we spent some time admiring their considerable skills. Our second stop was at a place apparently “famous for its cakes”. Sampling a few of them led us to believe that all of their cake recipes seem to consist of at least 90% sugar!

Back in Hanoi. At least the rain has stopped. We check back into the Camellia Hotel where we get an unbelievably enormous room on the second floor. We walk around the Old Quarter once again, exchanging money at the ANZ Bank (right on 4pm closing time), then unsuccessfully attempt to re-find the intriguing “Music Shop” we had seen earlier.

Back to Camellia to “freshen up” then off to dinner at 6:30. With all of us getting a little tired of the usual Vietnamese fare we chose, of all things, and Italian restaurant... and it was simply delicious! A stop off to check our email, then back to the hotel for bed... another early start tomorrow...

### ***Day 21: Fri 19/5/2000***

We were all ready to leave by 7:30 but yet another mini-cab mix-up saw us leaving an hour later. Today being Ho Chi Minh’s birthday, the Mausoleum was, fortunately, open (it is usually closed on Fridays!). So we go there first. As we are “honoured tourists” we get preferential treatment and join the long queue towards its front. No cameras were allowed as we all quietly but consistently filed 2x2 up the huge steps and through the huge doors into the cavernous interior. Once inside, we walked with fake reverence around three sides of Ho’s well-preserved corpse. A little too “preserved” we cynically observed. Then out through the rear exit, where previously confiscated cameras were retrieved. Ho was lit with an iridescent orange glow, helping him to continue to look charismatic, even in death. He is obviously still held in revered regard by the Vietnamese people.

Behind the Mausoleum was Ho’s stilt house where he spent a significant portion of his time, plotting strategies with his generals. Nearby was a bunker where they went to escape the American bombs.

The whole garden complex was beautiful - even when crammed with people as it is on this auspicious day. Several of them were more than keen to try out their English on us, and some of them spoke it very well indeed. Nearby was the One Pillar Pagoda, rising evocatively from its Lotus pond.

Our next stop wasn't too far away... Ho Chi Minh's Museum. Here the "revised and mythologised" story of Ho's life and achievements was told in a series of "vignettes" which were generally short on clarity and detail, but strong on symbolism, meaning and emotion. A very interesting experience. I got the impression that we were witnessing some sort of deification in process - a suspicion borne out when we witnessed other "celebrations" later in the day. Nic was a big hit in the Museum, with lots of people keen to have their photograph taken with him. We suspected the attraction to be his larger-than-life likeness to Uncle Ho!

Next stop, the Temple of Literature - an ancient university devoted to the Confucian tradition of learning, where 82 marble stellae recorded the achievements of the numerous successful candidates who passed the "examinations" held every 3 to 10 years, used to select the civil "mandarins" and "doctors". These stellae are quite huge and rest on the backs of giant turtles, representing longevity. Students still come here to seek good fortune for pending exams.

Then back to the Love Planet and an extended perambulation around Hanoi buying books, retrieving films, banking, etc. Finally found the elusive Music Shop before heading back to The Camellia (we had booked one of the rooms until 5pm), where we packed our back-packs, checked out, then stored our "large luggage" to be retrieved in a few days. Another perambulation to the (now closing) markets near the East Gate then off to the "Whole Earth" restaurant for a memorably delicious meal.

Back to the hotel, leaving at 8:30 for the Railway Station, passing through huge throngs of revellers, observing the city ablaze with colour. The Railway Station was the usual chaotic, decrepit shambles we've come to expect but, thanks to Mr Hai we eventually found our sleeping compartments where, after witnessing some highly animated negotiations by our fellow travellers attempting to also be upgraded to our "soft-bed" status, we slowly rattled off into the night, heading for Loa Cai in the mountainous north.

### **Day 22: Sat 20/5/2000**

A night of fitful sleep, mainly due to an intermittent though insistent banging sound emanating from the suspension beneath our compartment, seemingly amplified through the hard pillow!

We arrived at Loa Cai around 6:45 after being given all of five minutes warning to leave the train! After a minor problem with the Ticket Collector confiscating Nic's ticket we scrambled into yet another mini-bus and started our for Bac Ha, about 70 kilometres distant. We all proved to be too tall for the windows (even Liz!), resulting in some great views of people's legs as we drove by, but little else. We stopped at the Chinese border crossing and got into strife from one particularly officious policeman for trying to photograph one of the numerous heavily laden pushbikes. Along with the low windows, the mini-bus has clapped-out rear suspension which turned the bumpy, steep ride into a mini-hell which saw us bent-over and sore when we were finally and thankfully disgorged at our Bac Ha hotel (the Anh Duong Hotel).

Bac Ha is a sleepy little village with mud roads and very colourful inhabitants. Our room may be basic, but it features a superb view of the terraced mountains in the misty distance. After a leisurely "orientation" stroll through the town - which took all of 10 minutes - we grabbed an incredibly cheap lunch at the Cong Phu restaurant before returning to our hotel to relax with a game of cards. At 2:30 Hai took us (minus Nic) on a mini-trek to a nearby H-Mong village. With the drizzle turning to rain, the dirt road turned to mud, but we nevertheless reached our goal - chatting with six young boys boarding at the school there.

We slid our way back along the same muddy road, relaxing at the hotel for an hour or so before seeking dinner at the Cong Phu where we were treated to a "special" meal of fried pumpkin leaves and stems, selected and prepared by our own Mr Hai. Interesting flavour, but nothing to write home about (even though I am!). Back to the hotel to read and write, then off to sleep beneath two doonas - it's a chilly 16 degrees up here in the mountains!

### **Day 23: Sun 21/5/2000**

Catapulted from a 4am deep slumber by the urgent squeal of a pig being slaughtered next door. Just started to drift off again when the inevitable "political broadcast" began, co-mingling with the equally loud cackle emanating from our host's radio. Abandoning any thoughts of sleeping-in, we headed off through the growing throngs of people (Sunday is H'Mong market day) to breakfast at our "usual" restaurant where we played "foreign correspondent", photographing people through the restaurant window. And what a passing parade it was... colourful "hill-tribe" people, carting, leading, pushing and dragging their "goods" down the hill to the market, where they would try to sell or barter their various pigs, dogs, cats, chickens, plums, babanas, tomatoes, tobacco, firewood, clothing, handicrafts, horses, etc.

With breakfast finished we joined the milling throng and were astounded by the colour, the lack of hassle, the absence of beggars and the paucity of "Twentieth Century" produce. In fact it was just like stepping back into a

Medieval market, with numerous pack-horses tethered patiently outside, the 30 to 50 kilogram woven back-pack baskets with their emptied contents displayed as seductively as possible, and most of the menfolk just sitting back enjoying the plentiful rice wine while their womenfolk (who had carried most of the stuff to the market) did most of the actual selling. We bought a couple of colourful pillowcases and a top before heading off to the "opposition" restaurant for lunch, joined by a number of other Western tourists bussed in from Sapa for the market. We made one more slow perambulation of the market to watch it being disassembled, then back to the hotel for our usual siesta.

At 3pm, all of us (sans Glenys who chose to sleep) did a slow circuit through the town, across the river and back over the suspension bridge we had crossed yesterday. On the way we explored the old, decaying French Administration building which later became the "palace" for the H'Mong people but now is all but abandoned, but with some of the rooms, at least, serving as classrooms for the nearby school.

Back at the hotel we played a few hilarious games of cards, with the owner's son and family joining us for a couple of games of Concentration. There was much hilarity all around, despite the almost total lack of mutual language understanding. Six o'clock saw us off to dinner at our "usual" restaurant where we managed to spill half of it on the floor! Then back to the hotel to sleep. With the temperature now a little higher than last night, the mozzie nets were definitely needed.

### **Day 24: Mon 22/5/2000**

It's impossible to sleep beyond 5:30 in this town... the hotel's owner sees fit to entertain his guests by playing his transistor radio at full blast in in the courtyard; the next door neighbour seems to feel that this is a good time to slaughter his pigs whose screams set off the few remaining live dogs in the town, and the tourists from Sapa leave by bus at 6am, after their bus had warmed up its engines right outside our window.

Off to the restaurant for brecky where Glenny's order for "bread and omelette" somehow got translated into "banana pancake". Then we were off on our lon-awaited "Hill Tribe Trek"... which proved to be an 8 kilometre circuit to a couple of tiny villages to the north of Bac Ha. Along the muddy but slowly drying road we encountered spectacular views of terraced mountainsides, enthusiastic H'Mong children and visited the home of a H'Mong family. Here Hai told us about aspects of H'Mong life... how the boys marry at 15, faking a kidnap. How the family, owning a horse and two buffalo, was relatively well off, despite the earthen floor, leaky roof and lack of electricity. The old man gave us an impromptu demonstration of a "flirting

dance", accompanying his Tai-Chi like movements with a bamboo instrument that sounded a bit like a harmonica.

With our "trek" completed by midday we re-assembled for lunch at the usual restaurant and retired for our usual siesta as the clouds darkened outside. At 4pm, after a much needed rest, four of us (again without Glenys who continued to snooze) played cards in the courtyard until six when we all trundled off to our last meal in "our" restaurant. We shared some light-hearted banter with the owners, mainly involving the capture of mosquitos (of which there are many) with chopsticks! After much shaking of hands and fond farewells we made our way back through the now-darkened marketplace to the hotel where we continued playing cards until 9:15... which was WAY past our bed-times!

Not long after turning off our lights we were visited by a lone firefly, its flashing green light easily illuminating the room as it hovered around. A fascinating sight to round off another fascinating day!

### **Day 25: Tue 23/5/2000**

Awoke early to the usual cacophony of dogs, pigs, children chooks, radio, engines, political messages, etc. After a cold, almost non-existent shower we had an unexpected breakfast at our restaurant before reluctantly piling into the unsuspected mini-bus for the two hour trip back to Lao Cai. We stopped along the way to examine the tea trees growing on the steep hillsides. At one point we spied, through our low windows, a number of trucks parked on the sand flats near a particularly shallow part of the river. Hai told us in hushed tones that this was a "Smugglers' Market" and the truck drivers were illegally exchanging goods across the border.

The train left on time (10:10) and our seats were not quite as bad as we were expecting... at least they were partially padded - mainly for visual effect, we suspected. As we paralleled the Red River into the increasing heat and humidity of the lowlands we observed much "clandestine" activity aboard the train... men in uniforms carrying suspicious looking bags and boxes back into the luggage van, usually with considerable fervour. Dodgy looking passengers becoming increasingly nervous as a large number of the illegal vendors are also herded back into the luggage van. Mysterious boxes suddenly unearthed from beneath seats and retrieved from toilets. Many of them smelling suspiciously of cinnamon bark, which we further suspected was designed to hide any "other" odours.

We were not sure of exactly what was going on but clearly some sort of smuggling racket was afoot and was being exposed to the obvious glee of the military and police. This kind of smuggling-related activity continued throughout our journey... like searching beneath every seat, selecting and

confiscating luggage from the overhead luggage racks, escorting various people to the luggage van, offloading confiscated packages at stations along the way, the surreptitious discarding of stuff out of the windows as the train approached stations, etc...

The other event of note was a stone thrown at our window which, luckily, was protected by a wire grill. It scared the daylight out of us. Thirteen and a half hours after leaving Bac Ha, we finally arrived at Hanoi station, weary and with sore bums. We hired a little mini-bus which had seen better days, but eventually rejoiced at the sight of the Camellia Hotel rising like a beacon above the Hanoi hubbub. A quick wash of socks and undies then into bed for a very welcome sleep... and to be entertained by very vivid dreams.

### ***Day 26: Wed 24/5/2000***

An 8am start, after a very deep sleep. Our first stop was the Vietnam History Museum, presenting spartan but nevertheless interesting displays of objects from pre-history right up until the "American War". While a lot appears to be somewhat lost in translation we could gather enough from the English subtitles to conclude that much of Vietnam's history has been substantially "revised" to match modern-day politically-correct terminology.

Ditto at our next stop, the fine Arts Museum, housed in a classic French building which, thankfully, appears to have escaped the bombs. Here Art was presented from the various ages, each judged by the "correctness" of its artistic interpretation. Some of the war-based images, presented on silk, were particularly poignant and thought-provoking, as were some of the sculptures.

Next Hai took us to indulge in some of his long-promised noodles - but the restaurant was closed... so he shouted us lunch at a Vietnamese rice-paper place which served the kind of "slimy stuff" we used to find in Yum-Cha places. It wasn't as bad as it looked but I had no intention of going back for seconds! Hai then left us to our own devices (again) so we immediately set about spending money... firstly on cakes and cappuccinos by the lake, then on souvenirs.

Back to the hotel for our siesta then at four we all walked to the gigantic markets, housed over three stories and connected by escalators which, typically, were inoperative. Once again we were amazed at the sheer variety and volume of goods... and were pleased at the lack of pestering which led us to conclude that this was not a typical tourist market.

During our meanderings we called in to the very house where Uncle Ho drafted the Vietnamese Declaration of Independence - with its rooms still preserved exactly as they were except for the sheets covering the tables and chairs. After meandering some more through every street we encountered we

dined at the Whole Earth Cafe, did a little internetting then retreated to the Camellia to sleep... another early start tomorrow.

### **Day 27: Thu 25/5/2000**

Slept like a log. Woke up to the usual Hanoi cacophony. Piled into the mini-bus at 7am for a two and a half hour trip south to My Duc... a trip made mostly over bumpy, narrow roads which followed the maze of dykes once we left the dense Hanoi traffic behind. At My Duc we boarded two small sampans, each made of steel plate and propelled by a woman who faced forwards as she rowed. We all needed our umbrellas to shield us from the searing sunshine... it was well over 30 degrees.

After 90 minutes of rowing, and with sore bums from balancing on the tiny wooden seats, we arrived at the base of the mountain on which the famed Perfumed Pagoda is situated. The scenery here is reminiscent of Halong Bay - but with the towering limestone more heavily wooded - and rising sharply out of a sea of rice instead of from the sea proper.

The climb up to the Pagoda was quite challenging... 4 kilometres of very steep limestone steps made even steeper by the 33 degree heat and 88% humidity! We consumed over one and a half litres of water each and still felt dehydrated. Our clothes quickly became saturated with sweat but three of us eventually made it to the top - Nic and Vera sensibly gave up after about one third of the way up. The pagoda itself is actually a huge cave - with another 200 steps DOWN to it - with very little "pagoda" adornment added to it. The limestone formations themselves have, for over 500 years, been the source of divine attention - there are slalactites that grant fertility, those that enhance prosperity, etc. Deep within the cave were Buddhist worshippers chanting and praying amid the incense smoke. With my knees well bandaged, the downward journey back to the coracles began... proving to be much faster than the upward journey, but much tougher on the joints!

We lunched near the foot of the mountain, beside a stuffed deer hanging precariously and mysteriously from the roof. We then did the boat journey in reverse, feeling a little sorry for the woman doing the rowing but secretly pleased that we weren't having to do it!

The mini-bus ride from My Duc to Hanoi was like a rally-drive, with the driver taking more chances in every minute than we would like to take in a lifetime of driving. It was so scary at times that we just had to implore him to slow down, which he seemed to do for a minute or two before resuming his daredevil habits. Thankfully, we eventually made it in one piece. Back at the Camellia we bid our farewells to Mr Hai then did a little more shopping... I actually bought a pair of trousers for \$12. Then Liz, Glenny and I had our last dinner at the Whole Earth Restaurant where we had a lively conversation

about the philosophy of world models before heading one last time back to the hotel. Tomorrow we begin our homeward journey.

### ***Day 28: Fri 26/5/2000***

Our last day in Vietnam! Awoke early full of anticipation. Breakfasted at seven. With all our stuff just managing to cram into our bags we piled into our mini-bus at 8:40 and were driven - sedately - to the airport. We successfully negotiated the ambiguous, obscure formalities at the airport which looks more like a little regional airstrip than a truly international airport. It proved to be an uneventful, smooth 90 minute flight on the Thai Airways flight to Bangkok, arriving at 1:30. At Bangkok we whiled away several hours, including indulging in a meal of Kentucky Fried Chicken.

The flight to Sydney left at 5:45 and it also was smooth and uneventful. It also wasn't full, giving us a welcome opportunity to spread out and even catch a few winks of sleep. I managed to watch a bit of a creepy movie called *Supernova*. We managed to "see the lights of Sydney from a 747 at night" ... in fact, just as dawn was breaking. What a sight! We had to circle around a few times because a strong tail-wind had caused us to arrive earlier than the 6am curfew. We landed at 6:05. It was so great to be greeted with a friendly "g'day" by the airport officials. We lost sight of Liz before we could complete our good-byes but have promised a get-together soon. After a super-sedate \$70 taxi ride we were home...