

## 2000 FOUR PAGODAS Vietnam, Cambodia, Myanmar, Laos, Bangkok

Tuesday, January 18, 2000. Flew Atlanta/Tokyo in Delta's Business Elite. I was handed a questionnaire in the airport which raises several questions: Why does Delta hand out an extensive wine list when really the choice has been made for you and you just get to choose among four varieties? Why do the airlines treat Hawaii as a domestic destination? They should treat it as they treat other overseas destinations. Every other airline in the world offers at least a footrest in business class, but not our domestic airlines! And why in Business Elite can you only bring your footrest up all the way when you are in a reclining position? It's a 14 and 1/2 hour flight to Tokyo.

Wednesday, January 19. Arrive Tokyo and have an easy change to JAL for the flight to Hong Kong. The only problem was finding JAL's Sakura Lounge since no one in the airport speaks much English, but I needed a walk after sitting so long. JAL'S business class seemed very cramped after getting out of Delta's Business Elite, but they did have leg rests! I slept about 2 hours of the five-hour flight. I was on the upper deck of a 747 and did not care for it. There was only one bathroom for the 40 or so passengers. One time I had to go downstairs to use the facility since the line was so long.

Hong Kong's new Chop Lapskok Airport is very efficient; with a super highway system linked to it to carry you the 45-minute drive into Hong Kong. Angela, the Abercrombie and Kent representative met me and a woman named Sue Halpern, and took us to the Mandarin Oriental Hotel. Sue is traveling without her husband and tries to impress me with the extensive travel she has done, but I had to chuckle when she located Dar-Es-Salaam on the west coast of Africa. Bill Hurst, our tour Manager was waiting to greet us in the lobby, and then I went upstairs to hug Scotti, have a much-needed bath, and fall into the arms of Morpheus.

Thursday, January 20. Slept fitfully until 6:00AM and after breakfast go for orientation and to meet the rest of the group: Bill Hurst, our leader; Randy Ng who is coming along to observe since he will be leading this tour another time; Scotti and I; Al and Bev Sutton (he is a retired urologist); Jay and Suzie Schochet (he is in real estate, she is a lawyer); Florence Chaves, (who is about Scotti's age and a retired computer programmer from Pacific Bell); and Sue Halpern who came from the airport with me last night (she carries a suitcase full of food since she is a fussy eater). Bill briefs us on what to expect and then we go for our City Tour.

Everyone has been to Hong Kong before so it is not the usual Circle the Island tour. We start out with a walk through the Sheun Wan wholesale dried herb and fish market and Angela explains the various Chinese remedies being shipped all over the world. I was happy to hear they now use parts of the deer for sexual malfunctions instead of rhinoceros or tiger paws as has been traditional. At least deer are not an endangered species! Baby crocodiles, shark and snakes are also used for various ailments. It is chilly and windy and Scotti loans me her raincoat. Hope it warms up for I did not bring much in the way of warm clothes!

After the market we went to Hollywood Road and toured the Man Mo Taoist Temple, the oldest in Hong Kong. Since luck comes in doors and goes out windows, there are no windows in the temple. Unlike a Buddhist Temple where you come to pay homage to Buddha, here you can ask for things. People bring offerings of food and flowers, and after they have been presented may even take them home again to be consumed. Taoist worship is about nature and heroes. Man Mo is the god of martial arts. You can also get your fortune told at the temple by sticks and comparing the number to those of the answers. Four guardians, representing the four corners of the earth, flank the altar and people burn red candles for fortune and happiness (white candles are for funerals). The first and fifteenth of the month are the most auspicious days to come, but there were many people in the temple praying today. Scotti and I browsed some of the antique shops on Hollywood Road for I am looking for a Burmese Buddha to add to my collection. We did find a 200-year-old wooden Burmese Buddha, painted black, but it just didn't "speak to me." Angela tries to help but, of course, you can't go shopping with a guide because you lose your bargaining power!

Then the tour rode the funicular railway up to the Peak for its magnificent view of Hong Kong. The view is as great as ever, but the Peak has been turned into a multi-level shopping center, which makes it lose some of its charm. The bus came to the top and picked us up and on the way down we paused to admire an old traditional Chinese house. The present owner claims he doesn't know what he paid for the house since he paid in gold bars! The bathrooms are in a

## 2000 FOUR PAGODAS Vietnam, Cambodia, Myanmar, Laos, Bangkok

separate building, which is not very convenient. The back yard has some 50-year old bonsai plants and the house must have a spectacular view from the front.

Then it was on to Aberdeen and the traditional sampan ride through the floating fishing village. The fishermen live on their boats and it used to be said some never come ashore. We saw fishermen mending nets, drying octopus and fish, one sampan was a fruit and vegetable market and another was repairing motors. Still colorful, Aberdeen is much smaller than it used to be since the government has built high-rise public housing nearby and moved the people ashore. Also we saw no children, they all now go to school.

We continued to the impressive Aberdeen Marine Club for a dim sum lunch. After lunch some went to a jewelry factory, some took the Star ferry over to Kowloon and I went back to the Mandarin and had a massage. I even lifted a few weights in the health club, but when I got on the treadmill, I fell off when I tried to adjust my wireless earphones. It was very embarrassing.

We had our welcome dinner in the Mandarin Grill (an A & K tradition) and then hit the hay early.

Friday, January 21. Up early to walk a mile on the treadmill (didn't fall off this time). Then Scotti and I window shopped the mall adjoining the hotel and found some Buddhas. Then we were transferred to the airport and lunch at the airport Regent Hotel, a huge buffet with everything you can imagine. Bill had sent our bags on ahead of time so we do not have to stand around while they get checked. I am somewhat annoyed to find we are not business class but Bill promises to fix it for future flights. I can't imagine why Susan didn't do something about this when she wrote our tickets. It is a one and one-half hour flight to Hanoi. Scotti helps her Chinese seatmate with his landing cards, because he doesn't understand English. I didn't know Scotti could speak Chinese!

VIETNAM. We hardly knew what to expect. Memory reminds us of the Vietnam War and the terrible loss of life and destruction that happened here. What people forget is that the war ended 25 years ago and much has changed. The country was opened for tourism six years ago, and most of the tourists are Russian and French. However, there is no animosity shown Americans, partly because 65 per cent of the population is too young to remember and partly because the war is regarded as just a blip in Vietnam's fight for independence.

After the endless airport formalities we meet our guide Long whose name means "dragon" for he was born in the year of the dragon. On the long drive into Hanoi he briefs us on Vietnam's history. Independent until about 1000 AD the Chinese began encroaching on what we think of as North Vietnam from time to time and were driven back. Two hundred years ago, the Vietnamese conquered the Champa nation to the south and Vietnam got its present boundaries. The Chinese influence is still apparent, even though the French drove them out when they took over the country in the middle of the 19th century. The French were forced to give up the country at the end of World War II and Vietnam was partitioned into north and south, the north under the communist yoke of China and Russia, the south with a capitalistic government backed by the United States. A civil war broke out which was really a political battle between the USA and the communist powers. This became known to the Vietnamese as the "American War". As we all know the war ended in 1975 when the US pulled out. Vietnam was left very impoverished and people were starving for lack of food. To unite the country the communists started "reeducating" the dissenters, some were in programs lasting years, and the most stubborn ones were ultimately deported, many to the United States. Even the problem of the Amer-Asian children has been solved since they are now all grown up and most have relocated outside of the country. Without arguing the merits, or demerits, of all this, it did have the effect of making the country reunited under communism. While far behind China in its development, Vietnam is starting to have a market economy. Agriculture has been developed so that Vietnam is now the 2nd largest rice producer in the world. Coffee, marine products and lumber are also important crops. All prices in Vietnam are quoted in dollars and the dollar seems to be the medium of exchange. In fact, for the whole tour, we never had to change any money into local currency.

Our drive into Hanoi takes us through acres of rice paddies and we see the traditional Vietnamese houses, one room wide and two or three stories high with a balcony on each floor, that are called compartmentalized or tube houses. As we came into the city we saw grander houses of French architecture and cement block stuccoed buildings built by the Russians.

## 2000 FOUR PAGODAS Vietnam, Cambodia, Myanmar, Laos, Bangkok

Everyone is either growing or taking home Kumquat trees, covered with yellow fruit or sprays of peach blossoms, which are the traditional decoration for Tet, or Lunar New Year, which comes on February 5. Finally in the center of Hanoi we reach the classic Sofitel Metropole Hotel, built in 1901. It is well preserved with French charm. I had a room service sandwich before going to bed, while Scotti had dinner with Florence. Our group has been joined by Stewart and Susan Alpert (this is our third Susan!). They are from New York where he was a lawyer but is now in the real estate business. This brings our group to ten, a good size, and everyone seems very nice.

Saturday, January 21. Cold and drizzly. We have breakfast overlooking the street where we can watch the heavy-laden bikes and motorcycles heading for the market. There are no private cars but most of the population has a motorbike. The traditional costume for women is a long tunic over pants but this is rarely seen except for the hotel personnel. Women uniformly wear pants, we never saw anyone in a skirt.

Our excursion today is to Halong and the Bay of the Descending Dragon, where legend tells us a dragon fell into the sea carving out bays and islands. We drove to the military airport where we sat and waited and watched the thick fog. Just when I was sure they were going to cancel, we were loaded onto a 20-seat Russian made helicopter and took off. It wasn't very scenic in the fog but when we got to Halong the fog started to lift. A narrow waterway divides the town with the commercial part on one side, the resort hotels and tourist facilities on the other. 3000 islets are strewn in the bay of soft karst formation with caves and exotic silhouettes reminiscent of Guellin in China. We boarded our excursion boat and enjoyed the kids in their woven bamboo boats who came alongside to try and sell us shells and coral. The very scenic cruise through the islands takes two hours and the crew sets up a bazaar of embroidered goods to entertain us. Bill produces cookies and threatens that this may be our lunch since we are so far behind schedule, but we did find time later for a fast half-hour lunch with about 10 Vietnamese dishes at the Horizon Hotel before getting back to our helicopter.

When we reached Hanoi we stopped at the village or Bat-trang, where everyone is engaged in making pottery. Shops line the main street selling everything from dishes to large pottery dogs and elephants. The street bustles with bicycles and small carts delivering new wares, or carting off shipments swaddled in straw. Bill led us behind one shop where we saw a working kiln. The green ware is cast and then placed in a sort of basket for the multiple firings that each coat of glaze requires. Coal dust is mixed with water and dried in paddies stuck to the wall to act as fuel for the kiln. At the end of the street was a small market of vegetables and live chickens in cages. It was all most colorful.

Dinner in the Beaulieu restaurant with Florence and that night we went to a water puppet show, unique to this place. A stage of water, with the puppets operated by underwater rods, the scenes depicted various aspects of Vietnamese life like fishing and farming, and some folklore, and were most entertaining.

Sunday, January 23, 2000. Scotti and I take an early morning walk around the town, ending up at the lake where The Sword was Returned to the King, where early risers do their Tai Chi exercises.

The tour took us to the Ho Chi Minh Mausoleum. He was a friend of Lenin and brought communism to the country in 1930. He is considered a hero to the Vietnamese and is thought of as the country's greatest leader. Although he wanted to be cremated, his body was embalmed and is on display with an honor guard before a steady stream of visitors. When the French left, Ho Chi Minh declined to move into the yellow Presidential Palace, choosing instead a more modest dwelling nearby. It is still furnished as when he lived there. As his health disintegrated a stilt house was built for him, being more healthy than one on the ground, and there he died in 1969. Nearby is the 1000 year-old one-pillar pagoda called Chua Mot Cot. The French set fire to it in 1954 during their retreat from Hanoi but it has been restored. It was built by Emperor Ly Thai Tong to celebrate the birth of a son. One pedestal supports a symbolic lotus and a multi-armed Quan Yen (the Goddess of Mercy).

Then we were off to the Museum of Fine Arts whose top floors have a collection of contemporary Vietnamese paintings and on the lowest floor found a lovely multi-headed and armed Quan Yen, the hit of the museum as far as I was concerned.

## 2000 FOUR PAGODAS Vietnam, Cambodia, Myanmar, Laos, Bangkok

Next we came to the Chinese Confucian Temple of Literature and National University, built about 1000 AD and called Van Mieu-Quoc tu Giam. To become a Mandarin you had to study the writings of Confucius for many years. Many started but did not finish the courses. Confucianism lost its popularity because it was always looking back and not adapting to the changing times. The temple has some interesting funerary plaques, which are like tombstones and carry lists of ancestors.

On to a restaurant where we enjoyed a multi-course Vietnamese lunch. I tried to hand out some of my cards and found out why my eyeglass cleaner bottle was empty. It had all run out into my card case. It was embarrassing to hand out soggy cards but later we dried the rest of them with the hotel hairdryer!

Next the Tran Quoc Pagoda built in the 6th Century, which has stupas with plaques inside listing each person's statistics. Inside the pagoda, people were burning incense and bringing gifts to Buddha. Even a bottle of water was among the offerings! In a temple behind the Pagoda a service was being held, directed by a monk.

We drove by the old gate to the Hanoi Hilton, a notorious prison that no longer exists, but the gate has been preserved to commemorate the Vietnamese who were incarcerated there. No mention, of course, of the Americans who were also imprisoned in this infamous prison. Hilton is actually building a hotel in Hanoi but they are calling it the Opera Hilton because of its proximity to the Opera House. Who would want to stay at the Hanoi Hilton?

Then we got into pedicabs for an hour tour of the city. What an experience to plunge into the teeming mass of pedicabs, bicycles and motor bikes (I must look into Honda stock) which clog Hanoi's streets. Many intersections have no traffic control and there it is everyman for himself! At one point my cab bumped into Scotti's but incredibly I know of no other accidents. And what we saw was amazing. Everything happens on the sidewalks: hawkers push their wares of vegetables, mechanics work on motorbikes, barbers give haircuts, at small stands you can buy a meal or a snack, and kids play soccer. Everything is on sale - clothing, groceries, tombstones and New Year decorations.

Back at the hotel I took a two-hour nap, not so much from jet lag as just being tired! We went to bed early to prepare for the morning 4:00 AM wake-up call.

Monday, January 24. We left the hotel at 5:00 for the 6:30 flight to Hue. Bill has sent the luggage on ahead so we are inconvenienced as little as possible. He is one of A & K's top tour managers and does a great job of shielding us from the frustrations of travel.

Only we didn't get to Hue because of the weather and landed at Danang instead. We checked into the fabulous Furama Resort with a pristine powdery beach and pounding surf, and every luxurious facility we would ever need. It is drizzling (later raining hard) but at least it is warm enough that I can shed my thermal underwear! We hear that Atlanta is having a bad ice storm and the whole East Coast is coping with snow so we can't complain. We had lunch and I had a much needed manicure and pedicure. At last our guide, Minh, (who was born on Ho Chi Minh's birthday) appears with the bus from Hue, a three-hour drive over the mountains away.

We drove out of town past the Marble Mountain, from which they make everything from statuary to caskets. Our goal is Hoi-an, the old trading port. It is silted over now, reduced to a fishing village, and Danang is the modern port, but Hoi-an is protected as a National Monument and is delightful. Vehicles are banned, except for the inevitable bikes and motorbikes, so we walk in, our first stop the 17<sup>th</sup> Century Tao Temple with an adjoining museum. A large Mandarin figure dominates the temple. The streets are lined with Chinese shop houses made of teak with shutters instead of windows. A 17th century Assembly Hall honors Tin Has, the goddess of the sea. Two statue guards stand behind a dragon. One can see 1000 miles; the other can hear 1000 miles. The dragon stands for prosperity. Dragons, unicorns, phoenix and bulls all hold significance in a Chinese temple. The Chinese are ancestor worshippers and one hall has funerary tablets such as we saw in the Confucian Temple in Hanoi. Carvings of bats are everywhere for the bat is the symbol of happiness. Chua Cau, a 17th century covered bridge, built by the Japanese has a small Chinese temple off to where a monkey and a dog bless all who visit. The highlight of the walk was the old house of Phung Hung, which has been occupied by the same family for many generations. 86 columns of ironwood support the structure. During the devastating typhoon in December the family simply moved upstairs and waited for the 5-foot flood

## 2000 FOUR PAGODAS Vietnam, Cambodia, Myanmar, Laos, Bangkok

to recede from the house. No trace of the flood remains however, for, as the guide explains, they have frequent floods and lots of experience in cleaning up! On the second floor of the house they have an embroidery and souvenir shop. We walked down to the river and through the picturesque market in the drizzle before getting back on the bus.

Tuesday, January 25. We left at 7:30AM for Hue, 80 miles away. The trip takes more than 3 hours since some of the road was washed out in the recent floods and is under repair. It's still drizzly but there are patches of blue and we hope it will clear. Lantanas bloom along the roadside and one valley is covered with a vine that must be kudzu. The higher we climb on the mountain the more our view is obscured by mist but at last we go over the pass where we see old bunkers left over from the war. Traffic is heavy where a bridge was washed out but at last we were back on level land. We drove through a large cemetery where each grave is enclosed by a boat-like wall, supposed to be a tortoise representing long life. We stopped at the Royal Mausoleum where the last king's father is commemorated, but his body may be buried elsewhere, no one knows. The Mausoleum was built 1920-1931 and you climb up a series of terraces to reach the top. One terrace has stone guards reminiscent of the Xian warriors. The main building is covered with mosaics of ceramics and glass and in the center is a large bronze statue of the emperor under an elaborately decorated canopy.

Hue is the cultural center of Vietnam and was home of the Nguyn dynasty of emperors, who came into power in 1801 and lived here, even though they were puppets, under the French. The last one abdicated in 1945 and died in France. The most beautiful women in the country are said to come from Hue because the emperors kept many concubines in the palace.

Hue is on the Perfume River and was heavily damaged during the war. It suffered more damage from the recent flooding. The Citadel is an old fort built near the river and it is part of the wall surrounding the palace complex. The palace was bigger than, but patterned after, the Imperial Palace in Beijing. The South gate and the Kings restored Receiving Hall remain, but the rest of the Forbidden City is gone, destroyed during the war. UNESCO is trying to reconstruct some of it. To one side is the temple complex where all the kings of the dynasty are honored, each with his own funerary tablet. It is sad to think how much was destroyed.

We had lunch at the Hotel Saigon Morin, a truly sorry meal, with 6 or 7 western type courses: watery corn soup, dry broiled prawn, deep fried bass and tough filet mignon. Bill did supplement it with a delicious noodle dish. And then it was time for the long trip back to Danang.

Minh entertains us during the ride with various facts about the country: The reason the Vietnamese use a western type alphabet is because the Chinese letters are so hard to learn. When the French wanted to introduce Catholicism they needed an easier way to teach and converted the Vietnamese words to western letters. It seems so strange to be able to read everything but comprehend nothing! Ancestor worship is important because they believe the soul is lost if not attended to. One day a year they pay homage to their ancestors by bringing paper replicas of everything the ancestor might need which are then burned. Everything is available for "Hell" offerings: Hell money to bribe your way, Hell bus tickets, furniture, clothing, Hell airline tickets on Malaysia Airways (thought to be the airline of Hell), fake US dollars, jewelry, even a Hell Visa card.

On the way into Danang we stopped at the small open-air Cham Museum where artifacts have been collected from many of the Champa archeological sites. Bill shows his talent as a guide as he leads us through, describing each exhibit. After 200 years the Cham people have been integrated into the Vietnamese, only a few remain, mostly Moslems or Hindus. Buddhism and Hinduism coexisted into the 9th Century and many of the statues display both styles. Sculptures of the breast signify fertility. Vishnu rides the Garuda symbolizing good. The Garuda triumphs over the Naga, which represents evil.

Wednesday, January 26. We wait for the Saigon flight in the pleasant business class lounge with Stu and Susan, but they won't let us leave when the flight is called because "our bus is not there." Finally we are ushered out to a comfortable van with stand-up buses that transport the other passengers to the plane. We found these special vans everywhere we went on the trip. It makes you feel like such a VIP. They transferred us from van to plane with umbrellas and greeted us with hot towels and drinks. I could learn to like this!

## 2000 FOUR PAGODAS Vietnam, Cambodia, Myanmar, Laos, Bangkok

Saigon is 86 degrees and has bright sunshine! It is the largest city in Vietnam and has officially been renamed Ho Cho Minh City. However the term Saigon is still widely used and certainly is easier to say. The city is flooded with motorbikes and the ladies wear long gloves to protect themselves from the sun and scarves around their faces to protect themselves from the pollution. On the way to the hotel we pass the 1882 Notre Dame Cathedral, made from brick shipped here from Toulouse, France. Across from the hotel they are filming a movie and the ladies are all dressed in their native dress. We are housed on the Signature or Concierge floor of the Caravelle Hotel. Scotti and I lunch in the bar on the first floor. I have a delicious Caesar salad and she has a "colossal" club sandwich, which could have easily fed us both. We browsed the shops near the hotel and I bought a pair of Buddha figures, one male the other female, because ladies would find it easier to pray to a female figure. We also arranged to have outfits made of Vietnamese silk, which will be ready tomorrow. Our guide, Hai, takes us to a large market in Chinatown decorated with red symbolizing happiness and gold prosperity. The market bustles with all sorts of goods from hats to dried fish. Men on motorbikes almost knock us down delivering wares. One row displayed a colorful row of Buddhist hearses and elaborate caskets. A Buddhist funeral can last three days. During the French time the nearby shops were taxed according to their frontage so the shops are 4 meters wide and perhaps 15 meters deep with living quarters above.

We went to a lacquer factory where the process was described and demonstrated before we were invited into the large showroom. Prices were high, even with the discount, but I did buy a small lacquer box.

That night, Jay and Suzie, Florence and we went to the Camarque restaurant, an attractive open-air restaurant, about two blocks from the hotel. I had oysters and a delicious and spicy pasta dish.

Thursday, January 27. On our way to the tunnels, Hai talks of his childhood remembrances of the war. His grandmother was a communist but his uncles were both communist and capitalistic. One time one of the capitalistic uncles went to see his mother and had to swim a river, disguised under lotus flotsam. Politics was not discussed when the family got together. Hai's father was South Vietnamese and after the war was put in a "reeducation" camp, but his communist mother was able to get the sentence reduced to only one year. One of Hai's uncles was never "reeducated" and eventually was deported to the United States.

After the war many tried to salvage the aluminum from the land mines and lost their limbs or lives in this dangerous endeavor. People who worked clearing the mines were well paid but the risk was also great.

We stopped to visit a picturesque fishing village along the Mekong delta, where they also make pottery for sale. Another stop was at a house where a lady was making the rice paper casings for spring rolls. She can make about \$5 a day doing this. A batter is made from ground rice and fried like a crepe pancake. It is then put on a rack to dry for five hours in the sun. The family lived in an adjoining room with three beds, a table and stools, a florescent light and a TV set. A young boy was napping in a hammock. There was a separate washing room for the laundry and major cooking. The house was thatched with palm fronds.

And then we passed through an area of deserted houses, which had been abandoned after the area was devastated with Agent Orange and became unhealthy.

About 55 kilometers from Saigon's airport we came to the Cu Chi tunnels. The Viet Cong guerillas came down the Ho Chi Minh Trail through Laos and Cambodia and here, near the border, built a huge network of underground tunnels, which could house 3000 men. The horrors of the war were brought home to us as we viewed the exhibit of the booby traps and hidden pits like animal snares, designed to impale and kill our soldiers. There were secret doors and hidden air vents into the tunnel system where the guerillas lived like moles. Even if our soldiers were to find one of the camouflaged entrances they still might fall victim to a booby trap. There were several large rooms in the network of tunnels including a kitchen where the smoke went through a number of filters before being released so it couldn't be detected. No cooking was done when our helicopters were doing their reconnaissance overhead and the men slept in hammocks which were safer in the case of bombardments. There are 240 kilometers of tunnels, about 20 feet apart and interconnected. Some of the tunnels have been enlarged so that the tourist can go in and experience them. I went into a guardroom and also a kitchen where I was offered tea and

## 2000 FOUR PAGODAS Vietnam, Cambodia, Myanmar, Laos, Bangkok

tapioca while they explained how it worked. A surgery was shown, really just a small-unfurnished room, since they had no anesthetics and probably little medicine. It was all interesting but horrifying to view.

After a Vietnamese lunch in a restaurant near our hotel, we toured the Presidential Palace built in the early 60s for President Thieu who fancied himself a king. The reception rooms are elegant. There was even a raised dais in one from which the President would receive visitors. Everything was provided, movie theater, casino, and dance hall, even a private helicopter for the president. In the basement, under a thick layer of concrete, was the Command Center with the radios, map room, phones and even a small sleeping room for the President in the event of a bombing attack. The palace is not used today except for trade shows and conferences. A week before the end of the war, President Thieu abdicated and absconded with 2 billion dollars worth of gold.

We drove by the US Consulate, built where our embassy once stood and then went to the Ho Chi Minh Trail Museum where they displayed weapons and so forth used in the war. It really wasn't my sort of thing, particularly after the tunnel tour.

I much preferred the harbor tour that followed where we had a boat ride on the Saigon River and saw people living in small houseboats, and huge freighters from all over the world. The small local barges have eyes painted on their bows, which act as Plimsoll marks when the boat is loaded.

In the evening we went with Jay and Suzie to Le Caprice French restaurant on the 18th floor of the Landmark Building with great food and view.

Friday, January 28. I woke up sick, very sick, with cramps and vomiting, and this is the transfer day to Cambodia. I somehow gathered myself together for the trip, for the tour couldn't leave me behind, and was so glad to get to Le Royal Hotel in Phnom Penh and collapse in bed, missing the city tour. By evening we decided to get a Doctor Tan to come from the International Clinic to give me a shot to stop the vomiting. He felt I was sick from having started my malaria medicine (doxycyclene) the night before, and assured me I did not need to take it since malaria is only a problem if I go off into the jungle around Siem Reap. I had thought it might be the clams I had for dinner the night before.

Saturday, January 29. CAMBODIA. Mother and I were here 35 years ago, in 1965, when we made our innocent trip around the world and did not realize the United States had no diplomatic relationship with Cambodia, or Campuchea as the natives like to call it. We did have a delightful time since there were no tourists around and the Cambodian people were sweet to us! I wasn't sure I wanted to come back, our visit had been so special, but it is hard to see how anyone could be disappointed here!

Cambodia is a complete contrast to Vietnam. A kingdom, (King Sihanook is in his 80s and in poor health), the people drive cars as well as motorbikes. Although the country suffered under the Khmer Rouge and then the genocide years of Pol Pot, Phnom Penh, the capitol city has been repaired and the people seem happy and relatively prosperous, despite the beggars on the street with their missing limbs. Phnom Penh can be translated to mean the mound where Mrs. Penh had a house.

Our tour has been merged with another A & K tour, which is doing Thailand, Cambodia and Burma, and there are now 19 of us. All but the Schochets and we of the original group are concluding their trip after Cambodia.

I am feeling better but not up to the tour of the Killing Fields on the agenda today, so Bill arranged for me to go with Calvine and Charlie Bowen to see the palace. The Bowens are from Lake Forest, IL, and he recently retired from the insurance firm of Marsh & McLennan. They have already been to Laos and will take a cruise after this tour is over. The gold painted palace dates from 1912 and is bigger but similar to Bangkok's palace complex. The throne room is elegant but the king only sits on the throne on his coronation day, receiving from a lower chair on other days. On the ceiling are frescos of the Ramayana and the elevated gold throne, surrounded by parasols to show a kingly rank, symbolizes Mount Meru, sacred mountain of the Hindus. King Sihanook is Hindu although most Cambodians are Buddhist. Statues of the present king's grandfather and great grandfather flank the throne on either side. Nearby the throne room building is a smaller building used as a museum to hold the gifts the king has received and on one end there is a

## 2000 FOUR PAGODAS Vietnam, Cambodia, Myanmar, Laos, Bangkok

platform so the king could mount his elephants. Alas there are no elephants here now, nor did we see any on the rest of the trip.

A curious grey iron Victorian building was erected in Ismalia for the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869, and was brought to Phnom Penh by Napoleon III and Princess Eugenie to be used as their residence. After they left, the building was presented to the king and it holds portraits and photographs of members of the royal family as well as gifts they have received.

The prize of the complex is the Silver Pagoda rebuilt in 1862 of Italian marble. The wall around it, 42 meters on each side, has frescos of the Ramayana painted 1903-1904 by 40 Cambodian artists, which are unfortunately in need of restoration. The Silver Pagoda gets its name from the 6329 silver tiles that pave the floor. However, we see little of the floor since carpets cover it. There are over 1600 gifts (mostly Buddhas) of gold and precious jewels that have been given to the pagoda, and which are displayed in showcases around the sides. Presiding over it all is the "emerald" Buddha, the original of which is in Bangkok. This Buddha is made of jade from Laos.

In front of the palace flow the Mekong and Tonle Sap Rivers. The Tonle Sap is the largest lake in Southeast Asia, and during the monsoon season the river flows one way and during the dry season it flows the other way.

We went on to the National Museum where our guide shows us through the various galleries. Many of the exhibits were statues of Buddha and at some we were asked to present flowers (and a small donation). King Jayavarman VII introduced Buddhism to Cambodia in the 12th century, at which time Cambodia included present-day Laos and Thailand. One of the interesting exhibits was of a 19th century houseboat used by the king and there were caskets where a body could be kept for up to three months before cremation, waiting for an auspicious day. Calvin and Charlie went on to the market but I had run out of steam and went back to the hotel. And there in the Art Gallery store I found my Burmese Buddha! A late 18th century marble Buddha of the Mandalay period it has a metal headdress and is decorated with jewels. He is in the position of calling the earth to witness, with one hand pointing down. He is too big to take with us so will be air-shipped to Atlanta.

At lunch with Stu and Susan I mentioned my purchase and Stu thought it was the Buddha he had admired. When we went back to the shop, his Buddha turned out to be another one so two Buddhas are on their way to the States.

The new arrivals to the group beside the Bowens are: Dr Bert and Joel Myers. He is a surgeon in New Orleans and a photographer who has some examples of his work taking x-ray pictures of shells. Therese Pick from Chatham, New Jersey who has the same urge to see the more difficult parts of the world that I do. Robert and Joanne Wegsten from San Francisco. He has just retired from being a computer analyst. And lastly Robert and Emma Dailey from Long Island. He is an attorney. They all seem very nice.

We all flew to Siem Reap to see the highlight of the tour, the great temple of Angkor Wat. It is 119 miles from Phnom Penh to Siem Reap but takes a long time to drive because of the elephant size potholes in the road. Our guide, Koy So, takes us immediately to the temple so we can see the sunset, but it is overcast so the effect is not as spectacular as we hoped. There is a different feel to this place since Mother and I were here, less jungle, more parking places and lots more people! We will return tomorrow to see it in detail, but now we go to check into the Grande Hotel, built in 1928, now under Raffles management and still the best hotel in town despite the new ones that have been built. Many of the houses in Siem Reap are stilt houses, because it is cooler when they are raised off the ground. The temperature is perfect today, say 80 degrees, but when Mother and I were here before in November it must have been 100 degrees and very humid.

Sunday, January 30. Siem Reap was the old capitol of the Khmer Kingdom from its founding by King Jayavarman I about 800 AD until its capture by the Thais in 1431. There are many temples in the jungle around Siem Reap for many of the early kings built at least one and no ruler wanted to finish or use what his predecessor had started. After the capitol was moved the temples were lost, covered up by the jungle and almost forgotten, until they were rediscovered after Henri Mouhot, a French naturalist, published a report on his observations in the area. The French were making their presence known in Indo-China about this time and in 1863 archeological projects were started to clear the jungle away and repair the monuments, which still continue to this day. The temples are all built to much the same overall design. A square moat



## 2000 FOUR PAGODAS Vietnam, Cambodia, Myanmar, Laos, Bangkok

encloses a wall, and causeways cross the moat to gates in the wall. On the causeway is a stone railing of a serpent or naga, supported by statues of deities and demons. The deity's smile, the demons look fierce. The causeway is the rainbow bridge between heaven and earth and represents the "churning of the milk of the sea," the elixir of immortality. Inside the wall are more symmetrical moats, pools and buildings with towers, culminating in a central large tower symbolizing Mount Meru. One feature of Khmer temples is the use of the corbel arch where the stones are placed on top of each other, each one making the gap in the arch a little narrower. At last a stone is placed on top, instead of a keystone, to hold it together.

The largest of these temples is Angkor Wat, dedicated to Vishnu, and built by Suryavarmun II in the 12th century. It is built of ladinite (a hard red clay) and sandstone. The railing to the causeway is mostly missing but we walked in, pausing to offer some flowers to a Buddha image under one of the towers in the wall. Inside we passed treasuries and saw a monastery on one side before reaching the main temple. During the long period when Angkor was taken over by the jungle, it was the efforts of the few monks that remained that helped to preserve the temples. On the first gallery a magnificent bas-relief, 200 meters long, depicts the Ramayana. Climbing to the second gallery we came to the gallery of 1000 Buddhas but most of the Buddhas are now missing or vandalized, victims of the long period when Cambodia was at war with the Khmer Rouge. On the second side of the first gallery is the story of Suryvarman's life. Wonderful images are made of everyday life at that time. Part of the roof over the first gallery collapsed but has been restored. Koy So is a wonderful guide with clear English and he made the bas-reliefs come alive for us. Some of the more agile members of the group climbed up to the fourth level where there is a great view, but I did that 35 years ago and still can feel my aching legs after climbing those steep steps. Suryvarman's body was left in the temple until it was cremated and the ashes were thrown into the river.

On the way back to the hotel for lunch we paused at the small Wat Prasat Kravan, built in 921 by Hashaum I. 200 years older than Angkor Wat, it is made of brick. The brick was first dried in the sun and then figures were carved in it before a final firing made them hard. No mortar holds the bricks together. Inside there is a Vishnu figure with eight arms riding a Garuda. The French restored this temple in 1960.

After lunch we drove to Angkor Thom, Jayavarman VII's capitol city in 1131. He was the one who brought Buddhism to the country. Twelve kilometers around, the Naga railing on the causeway has been restored. The gates to the city are topped with a huge four-faced figure symbolizing the Buddha yet to come. This was Jayavarman's signature and is on all the buildings that he erected. One million people lived inside the walls during Jayavarman's time. This was the largest city of the Khmer empire. In the center of the city is the Bayon Temple built to house the Buddha figures of Jayavarman. Elaborate bas-reliefs depict how the temple was built, battles, and everyday scenes from the life of the people. After Jayavarman died, there was a Hindu revival and all the Buddha figures were destroyed, or modified to look like Hindu ascetics, The king was considered a Bodhisattva, a manifestation of the God of Mercy (Quan Yen), as is the Dalai Lama and the present king of Thailand.

Near the Bayon is the 350-meter long carved elephant terrace which surrounded the royal enclosure, but the palace itself was made of wood and has long since disappeared. Across from the elephant terrace are twelve shrines representing the twelve provinces of the Khmer Empire.

Outside of Angkor Thom we drove to Preah Khan (or Sacred Sword) temple, which Jayavarman VII built to honor his father. The complex covers 120 acres and there are 72 Garuda's in its decoration. We walked in through an alley of huge gum trees, from which the natives extract an oil resin, and also giant ficus trees. The ficus trees that engulfed the temple have been cut back or are dying, but one survivor has been left that supports a ruined archway. There are many Apsaras (dancing girls) among the carvings, but like the Bayon, all the Buddhas have been defaced.

Our bus is an old school bus with the springs long gone and we bounced and swayed back to the hotel like a drunken marionette. The original group of ten decided to have a farewell dinner together since most conclude their tour tomorrow, and we went across the street to a Cambodian buffet followed by a folkloric show of Cambodian dancing. Some of the dances (like the dance of the monkeys with their king Hanuman) were quite good but the program was too long and I

## 2000 FOUR PAGODAS Vietnam, Cambodia, Myanmar, Laos, Bangkok

became very tired since there were no backs to the chairs. We are sad to say goodbye to these people since we have had such fun together. It feels like we are breaking up the family!

Monday, January 31. The last temple we visited was the best. Ta Prohm, which Jayavarman VII built in 1186 to honor his mother. The complex is one kilometer long and six kilometers around. The archeologists decided not to restore this temple so you have the feeling of Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom as you climb through the ruins. 40 years ago the National Geographic printed a memorable picture of one of the four-faced towers engulfed by a ficus tree. That tree is now gone but many others remain, holding the walls in their octopus-like roots. There are 39 ruined towers, each originally sheltering a Buddha and hundreds of defaced Buddhas carved on the walls. One small room is an echo chamber where we beat our chests and the echo sounded like tribal drums. How beautiful it must have been.

On our way to the hotel we stopped at Srah Srang, the king's huge swimming pool, 800 meters by 200 meters and 2 meters deep. A small temple was once in the middle but is now gone. And then we passed Ta Keo, a temple started by Jayavarman V at the beginning of the 11<sup>th</sup> century. He died during its construction and before the bas-reliefs and carvings had been added so it stands as a sort of architect's prototype without adornment.

We commented on the many children trying to sell us souvenirs for \$1 and were told school is not compulsory. In cities 95 percent do go to school but few go in the country since they are needed to go to work and help support the family. There is no tuition for school, only a small annual fee that is used to maintain the school. When boys marry they move into the girl's family home, unless they are only children, in which case they stay with their own parents so as to inherit the land. All young boys are expected to be a monk for three months in order to honor their mothers. At age 21 they can become a full monk, which honors their father.

We flew off to Bangkok and made a connection to Yangdon (formerly Rangoon), in Myanmar (pronounced Me-an-mar). MYANMAR (which most people know as Burma) is another entirely different culture, where men and women both wear a sarong-like garment, sewn into a tube, called a longyi and flip-flops. They make a yellow paste from the bark of a tree and use it to paint designs on their faces, called tanaka. It's supposed to be good for the complexion as well as for beauty. The people are devout Buddhists and you can't wear anything on your head or feet when entering the temples.

Myanmar has been occupied at least since 2500 BC and is made up of 40 different tribes. Its first great period was in Bagan starting in 849 AD and its golden period came 200 years later when Anawratha ascended the throne and consolidated the kingdom. Bagan began to decline when Kublai Khan invaded the country in 1287, and all was chaos until the Shan tribe founded the kingdom of Ana near present-day Mandalay in 1364.

There were conflicts among the various tribes and in 1819 the British invaded, wanting to establish a buffer state between India and the French in Indo-China. They annexed all of lower Burma making it a province of India. Northern Burma remained lawless until the British took over the whole country. In 1937 Myanmar was separated from India but remained in British control. During World War II the Japanese and British fought over the country but after the war, in 1948, the country finally got its independence. Then began a power struggle that is still going on, there being as many factions as there are tribes.

Under Ne Win the economy stagnated, as did the standard of living and in 1988 huge demonstrations demanded his resignation. But unrest continued. Aung San Swe Kyi, the Nobel Prize winner, who was placed under house arrest in 1989, led some of the opposition. In 1995 the house had a great deal of surveillance.

There was a military coup and now Myanmar has a strong and oppressive military government although there are still dissenting tribes in outlying parts of the country. Most recently there was an incident on the border with Thailand involving hostages taken from a hospital there. In 1998 there were student demonstrations and the government retaliated by closing all the universities (except the medical schools for there is a shortage of doctors), and they remain closed to this day. The government controls the media and censors it so that the brainwashed people do not really know what is going on. Everyone must carry an identification card and any movement is checked. (We had passport inspection before boarding and disembarking every plane). The money is very unstable with the official rate of exchange much lower than the black market rate.

## 2000 FOUR PAGODAS Vietnam, Cambodia, Myanmar, Laos, Bangkok

The banks are going broke since no one uses them and the people keep their savings in gold. Because of all this many people are afraid to come to Myanmar, but the tourist who does come receives a cordial welcome and a view of a proud people maintaining their heritage and traditional way of life.

Soe is our guide and his name comes from the day of the week on which he was born, and has nothing to do with his father or mother's names. This makes genealogy in the country very difficult!

We notice that the cars drive on the right but also have right-hand-drive. The legacy of driving on the left was changed when the British left but many used right-hand-drive cars still come from Japan. Second-hand 50-year-old buses also come from Japan and are easier to maintain than modern vehicles in a country, which does not comprehend, advanced technology. The traffic lights have a counter that informs you when the light will change.

We check into the Strand Hotel and are given a suite complete with huge bath, sitting room area and, wonder of wonders, a butler who comes running at the push of a button.

Tuesday, February 1. We took a walk down to the Yangon River to watch the aged ferry come in. It disgorged an anthill of passengers and it is easy to see the boat would founder if everyone rushed to one side at once. There is a fast current in the river, which is a tributary of the Ayeyarwaddy River, which I was taught to call the Irrawaddy and will continue to use in this dialogue since it is easier to write. An alley near the hotel has a small market of food and foodstuffs.

We went to the Botatung Pagoda which houses one of Buddha's hairs. The temple glitters with mosaics of mirrors on the ceiling and gold on the walls. Outside we have small birds forced into our hands and find that for a dollar you can buy three or four. Releasing them gives us karma and will release us in our afterlife. The vendors go out at sunset with snares to trap the birds on their way to roost so they will have them for another day. We buy flowers to present to Buddha and then walk clockwise through the mirrored halls to admire the thousands of small Buddha statues that have been presented to the temple. Bombs destroyed this temple during the war, but in the rubble they found the cone shaped casket holding the hair and rebuilt the temple around it.

Above this structure is a 40-meter tall golden stupa spire. A golden brass Buddha in a side temple had been confiscated by the British so it was not destroyed and it was returned to the temple in 1951 after independence. It is lucky it wasn't melted down! According to legend, while it was in Britain it gave Queen Victoria a headache every night.

Bill leads us through the colorful Pazun Danong Creek native market where tourists don't go. Vegetables, betel nuts, fish, chicken, clothing and so forth are for sale and I bought a pair of flip-flops for about 50 cents. Nearby we could hear chanting in a monastery. Then we went to the Bogyoke market where the tourists do go and Scotti bought a ruby to give to Denis. Longyis, jewelry, dolls and other souvenir goods are to be found here.

Next we went to Chauk Htatt Gyee where there is a huge brick and plaster reclining Buddha 60 meters long and 14 meters high. On his feet are engraved the 108 auspicious signs of Buddha. When Buddha was born astrologers saw 8 of the signs on him, but since his parents didn't want him to become a Buddha they hid him in their palace, and even married him off at the age of 16. When he was 28 he went out of the palace to hunt and saw sights that made him become an ascetic and seek enlightenment.

Buddhism is really a philosophy rather than a religion. There is no supreme being. Some of the essences of Buddhism are not to do evil, to cultivate merit and purify the mind.

We have lunch at the Green Elephant Restaurant with its "distractions" such as a large shop of lacquer ware.

After lunch we went to the National Museum, which opened in 1996. One room displays eight small replicas of the gold thrones of the Mandalay dynasty. Dominating the room is the ninth, the high Lion Throne, and the only one still extant. When the king sat on his throne the people kowtowed to him while he held court. The British took this Lion Throne to Calcutta in 1902 so it was not in the palace to be destroyed in World War 11.

There were only two kings in the last Mandalay dynasty, King Mindon and his son, King Thibau who had a Queen Supayalat. Many of their furnishings and costumes are on display. King Mindon built Mandalay a city of gold according to a prophecy in Buddha's first sermon. When

## 2000 FOUR PAGODAS Vietnam, Cambodia, Myanmar, Laos, Bangkok

building the palace 52 men and women were buried alive so their spirits would forever guard the place. His son, King Thibau had 600 subjects battered to death when he felt his power threatened. Scotti bought me a lovely lacquer tray in the museum store for a birthday present.

And last we went to the gold tipped Shwedagon Pagoda which stands 98 meters tall on a 50-meter hill, dominating the skyline of Yangon. Some VIPs had commandeered the elevator so we walked up through a corridor of shops. The Pagoda was built 120 years ago with 80 pounds of gold covering the dome, the weight of the Queen who donated the gold.

The umbrella on top is also gilded and set with precious jewels including a huge 76-carat diamond on the top. The pagoda is solid but on the terrace around it are over 100 smaller pagodas housing Buddhas for people to pray to. There are 3000 Buddha images in the complex. At each corner there is a special pagoda where you go, depending on the day of the week you were born, to pray and wash the image with water using a dipper for every year of your age. This is symbolic to keep the Buddha from getting hot. I lost interest when I found out being born on a Thursday made me a "rat," a very messy creature. There is a drum you can sound to say you have paid homage to Buddha. Soe tells us that in his childhood it was a fun place to go and play hide and seek among all the pagodas!

That night Scotti and I had room service and massages. The two masseuses came to the room and climbed right up on our beds with us, using arms, elbows, even feet, to knead us all over. Strangely they used no lotions but we felt great when they were done.

Wednesday, February 2. We flew to Mandalay, the second largest city in the country, and the 19th century capitol of Burma. In 1886 the British captured Mandalay and moved the capitol to Yangon. As we landed we could see stupa after stupa covering the slopes. Our guide, Win, put us in a small bus with crystal decorations. We had lunch at the Sedona Hotel where Bill produced a birthday cake for me. After lunch we drove along the moat and walls that protected the palace. Each side was 2 kilometers long and had three gates. The king's barge remains, now a souvenir shop, but everything inside the walls was destroyed in the fighting between the British and Japanese in World War 11.

One gem of a building from the complex did survive because the king had had it moved outside the walls to become a monastery. It is covered with beautiful bas-reliefs and ornate carvings and decorations covered with gold. The main room was the temple (women are not allowed to approach the altar) and the monks lived in a room behind. There is a famous dragon carving. The temple isn't used anymore, just preserved for the tourists to enjoy.

Mahamuni (or the Great Sage) Temple was built in 1785 and destroyed by fire in 1884. It has been rebuilt and has stupas with slender spires in the Sri Lanka style. Indian style stupas are thicker. The Mahamuni Image came from the west of Burma and is six and a half tons of bronze covered with gold leaf applied by the faithful. It was old when it was brought to this temple and may date to the first or second century AD.

In the courtyard are some bronze figures that came from Angkor and the people believe that if you touch a part of them that corresponds to your own ailing part, you will be cured. There was also a three-headed elephant from Thailand.

In the town we paused to watch a parade of pink robed nuns who were soliciting money for a meditation chapel. They carried alms bowls, which are not begging, bowls, for to give to them is a privilege and brings you karma in your after-life.

We were taken to a small factory where they were pounding out the thin gold leaf that is sold in the temples to be applied to the images. Actually the paper the gold leaf is wrapped in is more valuable than the gold for it only takes 5 hours to pound out the gold, while making the paper takes several days. The factory is very noisy with women beating the paper to make it strong.

Finally we are taken to The Road to Mandalay, our floating home for the next three days. She was built in Germany for the Rhine River and named the Nederland but was later moved to the Elbe River to become the Elberresidnz and serve as a hotel for the city of Dresden. The same people that operate the Venice Simplon Orient Express bought her, had her completely refurbished at a cost of 6 million dollars and shipped her to Burma five years ago where she has done Irrawaddy River cruises ever since. Her capacity is over 100 but there are only 42 of us on this voyage making her feel like a private yacht. We have a lovely stateroom with sitting area, and large bath. However the room is too cold and in the middle of the night we called for more

## 2000 FOUR PAGODAS Vietnam, Cambodia, Myanmar, Laos, Bangkok

blankets and instructions on how to turn off the air conditioner. (You just slide a board over the vent!)

Scotti invited everyone for cocktails on the top deck in honor of my birthday and another cake was produced at dinner. I wish people would quit reminding me how old I am becoming! During cocktails we can look across the river at all the pagodas on Sagaing Hill

Thursday, February 3. I wake up with laryngitis; the tour has been passing a cold around. We got up early to see the monks of Shwe Kyet Yet Monastery come out to do their morning alms collection at 6:00 AM. Monks can't eat between noon and 6:00 AM. Perhaps 30 monks, in their reddish colored robes, formed a long line to parade through the town gathering donations. The ship is ready for them, with a large quantity of rice and curry to hand out. Bringing up the rear of the line is an adorable 4-year old. The village is interesting with the traditional Burmese stilt houses made of teak with woven bamboo sides. Roosters crow and chickens run loose underfoot. There is no electricity except in one house where a man needs it for his weaving machinery. In a small market the ladies are selling fresh fish and we are able to look into some of the homes where the families were preparing their breakfast.

Then we boarded the bus and drove through rice paddies and fishponds, created by the Irrawaddy floods. The Irrawaddy starts in China and runs 1275 miles from north to south in Myanmar. We cross the river on the Ava bridge built by the British in 1934, the only bridge to cross the river, and go to Sagaing Hill, which is covered with pagodas, mostly white but a few have golden spires. This is the spiritual center of Myanmar and there are over 500 monasteries here.

Gandayo Monastery is the most famous one, built over a cave where a monk once meditated before he founded the city of Sagaing in the 14<sup>th</sup> century. Pagoda Shin Pagoda has four huge Buddhas facing the different directions. Here we are given the chance to release baby owls and, of course, we do at \$2 apiece (more expensive than in Yangon). Pure gold sheets cover the Pagoda and stupas. Plaques list the names of the donors to the Pagoda.

Then we went to Zayar Theingi Nunnery where the girls with shaven heads were studying their lessons. To graduate you must be able to recite 800 pages of the sacred books without any mistakes. The girls sit in small groups and appear to be in a shouting contest as they recite their lessons simultaneously. There are 100 nuns in this nunnery but many of them are out today begging for money. The chief nun is 81 years old and started when she was 9.

Setting sail we cruised all day down the river enjoying the sights along the broad floodplain. The river has treacherous sandbars and often changes course. In the dry season it sometimes becomes so shallow. The Road to Mandalay can't move. Gone are the king's barges powered by 30 or 40 oarsmen and huge steamers. There are small fishing boats, ferries and rafts of bamboo carrying freight down stream. When they get the freight to its destination 3 or 4 weeks later, the raft is broken up and even the bamboo is sold. We anchor for the night just north of Bagan.

Friday, February 4. We dock at Bagan and board the bus to tour the plain. Anawratha ascended the throne at Bagan in 1044 and consolidated the country into a Buddhist empire. He began the frenzy of pagoda building, each king trying to build more than his predecessor. At one time there were thought to have been 13000 monuments in Bagan, 2200 remain today. Many are in ruins due to earthquakes, time and man, but a lot are also being restored. Marco Polo described Bagan as a gilded city alive with tinkling bells and the swishing sounds of monk's robes. Eleven Kings ruled in Bagan from 1057 to 1287 when Kublai Khan invaded and conquered the city. Then the Capitol was moved elsewhere.

The native houses have been removed from the Pagoda area and about 100000 people were given plots of land and resettled in New Bagan and 12 villages nearby. Thus the plain seems deserted except for the occasional farmer working his land growing cotton or peanuts among the acacia trees. Trishaws, bikes and hackney carts carry them about.

The first Pagoda for which there is evidence was built in the 9<sup>th</sup> Century, but most date from the 11th to the 13th century.

Our first stop was the Sulamini Temple of lovely brick with a delicate spiral stupa dating from the 13th Century. The stupa has a modern umbrella gold top. The umbrellas weren't used until the Mandalay period.

## 2000 FOUR PAGODAS Vietnam, Cambodia, Myanmar, Laos, Bangkok

Our second stop was at Pya-tha-do Pagoda built in the 13th century and we climbed to the top for the spectacular view. We stopped to photograph the biggest Temple, Dhamma-yan-gyi Patho, built by a cruel king who cut off fingers and arms of the workers if their work wasn't perfect. Then he killed most of them so others wouldn't steal his building secrets.

The most beautiful Temple is Ananda, built in the 11th Century with golden stupas. It has four 10-meter tall standing Buddhas and 100 smaller Buddhas in niches. The corridor has gothic-like arches. The east and west Buddhas are not original, about 100 years old, the originals having been burned by the candles used when troops lived in the temple during the war with China. But the south and north Buddhas are original to the 11th and 12th century. One seems to smile at you until you approach. Buddhas of this era have shorter necks and medium sized ears. In the Mandalay period the ears are longer and touch the shoulder. The longer the earlobe the later the period. There are heavy teak doors in lattice patterns, which are closed for meditation. The temple was damaged by earthquake in 1975 but has been repaired. We had to run a gauntlet of souvenir shops to return to the bus.

Then there was the Shen Shan Sunset Pagoda built in the 11th century, which houses a hair of Buddha.

The old city moat and crumbling wall around the palace still exists but only the foundations of the palace remain.

Our last stop was a lacquer factory but we could only stay a short time as five of us have signed up for a balloon ride with Balloons over Bagan. They have only been in operation for two months and we are their 19th flight, but the manager is a long time balloonist who has started balloon operations all over the world. It was somewhat iffy if we would get to go but we waited and waited until finally the wind dropped and they started filling the huge balloon. At last we climbed into the basket for a spectacular 45-minute ride out over the Sunset Pagoda and landed in a field, which immediately filled with spectators to watch us drink, the traditional champagne. It was great fun.

Saturday, February 5. Left the Road to Mandalay and flew back to Yangon, where we made a stop at the Green Elephant for people to buy more lacquer. Then a stop at the Gem Museum, where Scotti and I buy ruby rings before being taken to the Inya Lake Hotel for lunch and the long 4-hour wait for our plane to Bangkok. Really a wasted day.

THAILAND. Flew from Yangon to Bangkok where Sue transfers us to the Oriental Hotel. This hotel is one of the finest in the world but they have enlarged it considerably and it has lost some of its intimate charm. They have built an esplanade along the river and Scotti and I dine at the Ciao Restaurant where we have delicious pizzas while watching the constant stream of traffic on the Chao Phraya River. It is Chinese New Year and many Chinese have come to Bangkok to celebrate. A human dragon is forming on the street outside the hotel.

Sunday, February 6. Both of us are fighting the cold, which has plagued the group, but fortunately the Oriental has a Clinic where we get medicine. Then Sue loads us onto a barge and we are taken up the river to the Royal Palace. The river is very dirty since people dump everything into it, but it is still fun to see the city from this prospective. Originally Bangkok was built around a series of klongs or canals, but they mostly have been filled in to make roads and the shore of the river has been diked so what klongs do remain are not accessible. Thus to see a classic floating market you must go elsewhere.

The palace is mobbed with people and Sue says it is like this all the time. Scotti and I are glad we saw it in less crowded times, but Sue does a good job of keeping us in the shade and away from the worst crowds. We tour the new crown jewel exhibit, large jeweled rings, swords, crowns, even one of the costumes used on the Emerald Buddha. He has three ornamented costumes, one for each season, wet, dry and hot. The palace compound glistens with gold on all the ornamented buildings. Huge jeweled guardian statues stand at attention, gold Apsaras dance on the walls and all the roofs are decorated with curving dragons. There is a model of Angkor Wat since it was once part of Thailand. The crown jewel of the complex is the temple of the Emerald (really jade) Buddha, where the small figure sits enthroned on a high seat, surrounded by golden parasols. The Buddha was originally in Laos but captured by the Thais and brought to Bangkok.

We escape the crowds and have a slow trip through Bangkok's famed traffic to the Regent Hotel where we are served a fixed menu lunch. The service is very slow and the chairs are

## 2000 FOUR PAGODAS Vietnam, Cambodia, Myanmar, Laos, Bangkok

uncomfortable and it takes two hours! I catch a cab back to the Oriental after lunch while the group goes on to Jim Thompson's Home a well-preserved classic Thai House that is now a showcase for the beautiful Thai silks that Thompson developed.

That night we have our farewell dinner in the open patio behind the hotel, delicious Thai specialties, and we say good-bye to all but Jay and Suzie who are going on to Laos with us.

Monday, February 7, 2000. LAOS. Only four of us have signed up for the extension to Laos, so A & K does not send an escort with us. They have also not been able to clear Scotti and me in business class. It isn't so bad in coach, only a 50-minute flight, but the bad part is when we reach Vientiane and have to cue up for a visa. All the business class and all the groups got taken care of before us so it was almost an hour before they let us into the country, and then only after careful scrutiny of our itinerary!

Khamman, our guide meets us and takes us on a city tour. Laos is made up of 70 different tribes. The country ranges from high mountains where the Mons people live to low plains, where Vientiane the capitol is.

Laos is a poor country, its main export being hydroelectric power, which it sells to Thailand. Also it exports timber and textiles. It is a laid-back country and relatively untouched by tourism. The main means of transportation seems to be the motorized rickshaw (or Tuk Tuk) cabs and there are some motorbikes, but traffic congestion is not one of Vientiane's problems! Outside of the capitol, we understand the roads are in very bad shape. Now a Democratic Republic, Laos was once three kingdoms until the French, along with the rest of French Indo-China, occupied it until 1945, and it sided with the North Vietnamese during the "American" war. The quiet main street has some French Colonial buildings and lots of elaborate Wats (or temples). The country is very devout Buddhist.

The first Wat we visit is Sisaket, built in 1818 and restored in 1935. A young girl talks us into releasing some caged birds to help us in our afterlife. Although connected with a monastery, the temple is now a museum. Wood frame buildings covered with beige painted stucco with white and gold trim and tiled roof give these buildings their own distinctive look, different from what we have seen before. The quiet cloister around the temple is filled with over 6000 Buddha images, some life sized, other small ones in niches along the walls. The smaller ones come in pairs symbolizing that man and woman should live together. A Laotian Buddha is slightly different from the ones we have seen since the eyes are half open so the statue appears to be looking at you. The Indian Buddhas have sharp noses; the Laotian ones are more rounded. A flame-like ornament on the head symbolizes a teacher. Many of these Buddhas date from the 17th century and have been collected from all over the country. Even some broken ones are enshrined here. A standing Buddha with hands up symbolizes "peace", one with hands out at the sides is "asking for rain." A long wooden painted dragon is really a water trough providing water to wash the Buddhas on the New Year each April. We took off our shoes to enter the temple, which has a dragon on each corner, and inside bats roost overhead. Five smaller ones flank the main Buddha and there is a fresco in very bad shape on the wall. A gold throne is on one side for the highest-ranking monk. There is a bookshelf for the holy books. It is a very peaceful place.

Across the street is Hophrakeo Wat, which originally housed the Emerald Buddha now in Thailand. It was built in 1565 but destroyed and reconstructed in the 20th century. In the garden is a huge jar from the Plain of Jars, which was used to ferment rice for the 85% alcohol rice wine. A very beautiful carved door graces the building, which is built of teak with subdued coloring, and inside is a museum of Buddhas, including a small replica of the Emerald Buddha. The main Buddha in the temple is a 19th century, white plaster Buddha from China.

We drove along the Mekong River, which separates Laos from Thailand. A large fertile island in the middle is divided into small farm plots.

Lunch was at Krua Lao Restaurant. Laotian food is similar to Chinese food, many courses of stir-fry. And it always is accompanied by a large helping, served in a covered box, of sticky rice. I tried to eat some to be polite but think you must be born Laotian to appreciate this dish!

Then we visited Wat Simuong, or the Lady of the Tower. This is an active temple where young couples come to be cleansed before they marry, sick ones come to be cured, and pregnant ones come to be blessed. The temple has been newly painted red and yellow, and there are orange lions guarding it, under its steep tiled roof. Inside a monk is blessing people by tying a cotton

## 2000 FOUR PAGODAS Vietnam, Cambodia, Myanmar, Laos, Bangkok

string around their wrists for luck. There are many offerings of flowers, fruit and incense. I shook a rattle for my fortune and got #17, which wasn't so good. My difficulty will soon be over and if I get pregnant I will have a girl!

Then we were off to the airport and the short flight in an old propeller plane up into the mountains to Luang Prabang, the old capitol of Laos. We landed and were taxied to a large airplane hanger, from which they bused us into the terminal, for the airport is being expanded to take jet planes. I'm glad we're here before all those tourists arrive!

Som Pong is our guide, and speaks excellent English, despite the warnings we had been given that the guides were hard to understand.

Luang Prabang is a charming town of 24,000, sitting in a scenic valley in the mountains along the Nam Kong River, a tributary of the Mekong. Colonial style buildings line the streets and the small tourist shops are selling textiles and other tasteful items hardly a t-shirt in sight.

We stop at Wat Visounnarath and Som explains that there are always five ingredients to a Buddhist Temple: First the main temple itself. Second a stupa or stupas, which hold the ashes of the dead, or hold small statues of Buddha to pray to. Third a Banyan tree, for Buddha sat under a banyan tree meditating until he found enlightenment. Fourth a house where the monks live and fifth a small house which holds the drum that calls the people to prayer and so forth. Under this banyan tree are hung small replicas of skeletons and it is part of a ceremony for those who have died. Sand is used to give the soul back to the body. The temple is white stucco with gold doors decorated with Apsara, and dragons are on each corner of the roof. It was built in 1503 and was destroyed, but restored in 1896 in the original style. The roof is multi-tiered to represent Mount Meru and there is a spire on top. The Chinese and Vietnamese use dragons but in India the Naga or serpent is used. In Laos they use a combination animal, part dragon, part naga (the serpent) that they call something that sounds like ny. A large golden painted Buddha is inside with two standing Buddhas on each side and smaller Buddhas in front. The large image is always the first thing built so it is the same age as the temple. There is a "watermelon" shaped-stupa, which has been restored and holds the ashes of a king.

There were other adjoining buildings, which we did not explore. Near Wat Pahvot we walk down to the river to watch the sun set. The gold painted footprint of Buddha (perhaps 10-feet high), dating from the 14<sup>th</sup> century, is in a small grotto near the water. Wat Pahvot is mixed Vietnamese and Laotian style. There is a reclining Buddha in a nearby building. The reclining Buddha is either sleeping or dead in Laos. In other countries he may also be resting and talking with his disciples.

Our hotel, the Souvanaphom, was named for a prime minister of Laos and was his residence. French colonial style with open-air dining room and traditional furnishings, it only has 26 guest rooms, which are furnished in white wicker. It feels like a country inn instead of a hotel.

Before dinner we are welcomed with a Baci ceremony. A man intoned some words of welcome and then the 20 or so ladies present came forward and tied cotton strings around our wrists until we wore 2 inches of these bracelets. Food was offered us (sweets) and a sip of the famous and strong rice wine, and then some girls came out and danced traditional dances for us while a band played music on the native instruments. It was all quite touching.

Tuesday, February 8. First Wat Xieng-Thong, built by King Saisetthathilat in 1559. A short temple with the graceful curved roof three times higher than the building. Nearby is another building with a Ramayana bas relief housing the elaborate gilt funeral carriage of the next-to-last king, King Sisavarong. The chariot is shaped like a boat with one large and two small urns on top, designed for the king, his wife and son, to carry their souls across the river where they can be reunited with their bodies. Displayed in the building are black funerary stones, panels with small Buddhas, one for each year of age.

The magnificent main temple is highly decorated in red and gold stucco and contains the original bronze Buddha. 450 year-old murals last restored in 1952 cover the wall. There are two smaller chapels for prayer, one built in 1814 has a graceful bronze reclining Buddha which is as old as the main temple.

Outside the temple we boarded a narrow motorized riverboat for a two-hour ride up the Mekong River to the caves at Pak Ou. Mist enshrouded the ragged mountains on either side. Farmers own and garden small plots on the rich flood plain. There are fishermen and women doing their



## 2000 FOUR PAGODAS Vietnam, Cambodia, Myanmar, Laos, Bangkok

laundry in the brown water. Small rock islands and sandbars make navigation treacherous. It's a beautiful cruise.

We stop at Sanghai Village where they make the rice wine. Sanghai means pottery but none is made there any more. In fact, the main business seems to be tourism as small shops line the main road. To make the wine they cook sticky rice in steam and then wash it to get rid of the husks. Yeast is added and it is allowed to ferment for two or three weeks. Then it is distilled. Four jars of fermented rice makes one jar of wine. The houses of the village are thatched stilt houses and underneath many of them are looms where the women work at the lovely fabrics. The upper part has two rooms, a large one to welcome guests and a smaller one behind a door and mosquito netting, where the family sleeps. The roof has a high peak so the rain will run off and make the thatch last longer although it still must be replaced every four or five years. The newer houses have enclosed the lower part and have tin roofs, which do not have to be so steep. The village has a small temple painted red and gold. Off the main street we found a man weaving a basket.

Further on are the Pak Ou caves, reached by climbing steep steps up from the river. The lower cave is filled with hundreds of Buddha offerings. The altar is interesting in that a stupa, not a Buddha, stands on top. In the 16th Century a king brought it under royal patronage and the Laotians consider the caves holy. As in the other temples a Ng trough (part dragon, part naga) is there so the images can be washed. Across the river we can see the confluence of the Ou and the Mekong Rivers with the Ou's clear water running into the muddy Mekong.

We started the long climb up to the higher cave but Suzie and I soon weary and stop at the rest station while Jay and Scotti go on to the top. Then lunch is produced, with chicken and a hard-boiled egg, and the inevitable sticky rice and some cold stir fry vegetables. Like all the meals there is far more than we can eat!

Returning to Luang Prabang, we are driven to the village of Ban Phanom where every house has a loom and at the end of the walk is a handicraft shop where all the women have stalls to sell their wares. Some sit or kneel on their tables and you can't make eye contact with them without them lifting one of their fabrics for you to examine and hopefully buy. There are few men to be seen in the village, they must work elsewhere.

That night we go to the Visoun Restaurant and are taken upstairs to a room for the tourists, rather than the native dining room where they eat around lazy susans. More of the same fixed menu food, which is getting monotonous.

Wednesday, February 9. We tour the Palace, now a museum. A green and gold temple called Pra Bang sits outside which was started by the king, but finished later, dates from 1970. The palace was closed after the overthrow of the monarchy in 1975 and reopened as a museum in 1988. No one knows the fate of the last king of Laos. The palace displays a high gilt seat where the most prestigious monk sat, a foot higher than the king himself. Artifacts are in cases along the wall, including a small Buddha statue uniquely holding an alms bowl. There is another unusual Buddha shown with two crying figures behind him. The throne room itself is magnificently decorated in red with glass mosaics on the walls depicting the history and legends of Laos. Behind the throne is the Laotian story of the creation where the demons and gods fought and destroyed each other's work, but the demons were unable to cut down the god's tree. They did cut into a gourd and from it the first man came. The darkest men came first, the lightest last. Around the room are low couches for the people to sit upon. There is also a howdah displayed.

An adjoining room was the library where books from Thailand and China were kept and beyond that the Queen's bedroom. The king's bedroom was furnished with simple wooden furniture, but the foot of the bed was decorated with a carved three headed elephant. The last king only used this palace for ceremonial purposes having a home elsewhere. Another room displayed masks from the Ramayana dances and old musical instruments. We saw the dining room and then one of the waiting rooms with a huge portrait of the last king painted in 1967 and other members of his family. A second waiting room has bold murals done by French artists depicting life in Laos.

We were given some time to shop and then drove to the high one-way bridge over the river which boasts the only stop light in town, not working at this time. We stop at Bon (which means village) Don and see an old fashioned forge where they are making knives. One woman mans the

## 2000 FOUR PAGODAS Vietnam, Cambodia, Myanmar, Laos, Bangkok

bellows while a man guides the hot metal over the anvil and two other men pound it with mallets to flatten it. The result is a very sharp machete, with a bamboo-covered handle. Each house in a village has a number but the streets don't have names. A lot of the economy is based on the barter system. The people are poor but chickens and ducks run loose in the village and there are a few turkeys recently introduced.

In Ban Xang Khono there is a paper factory where the paper is made from the bark of a tree. First it is boiled and then pounded, mixed with liquid and poured into a frame where the ladies add decorations of flower petals. It is dried at least one day and a hard paper is formed which can be folded to make books. In the north part of the country they make paper from rice.

Then Som takes us to a silver smith where high quality silver goods are pounded and tapped into shape. Laos is a land of crafts!

Then we tour the large market, where Som explains some of the strange foodstuffs we see on sale. Dried seaweed from the river, buffalo skin, all sorts of spices, the ingredients to combine with the betel nut for chewing, as well as the familiar items we are know.

Lunch was at the picturesque Sala Kheme Khane restaurant overhanging the river. I just wish when they made chicken soup they didn't leave the bones and skin with the chicken. At least Som orders regular rice for us instead of sticky rice. This restaurant has a regular menu and I don't understand why we are not offered it. People at the next table were eating French fries.

We flew back to Vientiane in a somewhat newer propeller plane and are met by Serot who takes us to Carol Cassidy's. Carol is a dynamic and talented artist, a weaver who has developed her techniques around the world. She came to Laos eight years ago and started people raising the silk worms. Then she designed and built her own spinning wheels and looms and trained the people to operate them. She dyes all her own silk and creates unusual patterns for them to be woven. A tour through her factory was fascinating, and the finished products are the most beautiful we have seen, but expensive. She fills orders from all over the world and her goods are in such demand she has very little for sale. Then we go to a small shop that Scotti had read about that sells Buddha figures. We have been told that only wooden Buddhas can be taken from the country but the lady assures her that also brand new metal ones can be taken out as well (wrong!). Scotti finds a lovely Buddha, carrying an alms jar like the one we saw in the museum.

The guide wants to show us another temple but we are tempted out and insist on being checked into our hotel, the Settha Palace. At dinner we are offered the set menu but rebel. It is time for reentry into the real world and we order from the a la carte menu. I had snails and Coquilles St Jacques (made with pasta instead of mashed potatoes) and they were delicious!

Thursday, February 10. We fly back to Bangkok. As we go through airport security Scotti's Buddha shows up on the x-ray. Cries of "Buddha, Buddha" are heard and she must open her suitcase. But she is prepared with a wooden Buddha she got in Cambodia on top and when the guard sees this he shows no further interest and passes the bag with its illegal contents through!

Back in Bangkok we are transferred to the airport Amari Hotel. Had a farewell lunch with Jay and Suzie who are going on to Singapore this afternoon. We declined the buffet (too many on this trip) and I had a salami and cheese sandwich! After lunch

Scotti heads for the pool, I had a manicure, pedicure and shampoo for \$20! In this part of the world everything is so inexpensive! Supper in the hotel followed by two massages in our room, one by a man, the other by a woman. I drew the man who pummeled me with feet, hands, and elbow even more than the massage in Yangon. I felt as if I was in a Thai kickboxing match but after it was over I felt so good and slept all night.

Friday, February 11. Scotti and I parted and I headed for JALs lounge. When they called the flight for Tokyo I went to the gate stated on the boarding pass, only to find I belonged at another gate entirely, in another section of the airport. I hurried to the proper gate and then they found I had gotten through emigration without some essential stamp in my passport. With a JAL man guiding me, we raced back through the airport for the missing stamp, then raced back to the plane which had been held for me. I nearly collapsed, but at last we were off for the five-hour flight to Tokyo where I connected with the 1 1/2 hour flight on Delta back to Atlanta.

2000 FOUR PAGODAS  
Vietnam, Cambodia, Myanmar, Laos, Bangkok

It was one of the most fascinating trips I have ever taken, but it was really too long. I am glad to be home.