

Cambodia, Thailand, Malaysia, Singapore

After China and Vietnam we really rolled into high gear in terms of visiting multiple ports in multiple Asian countries. Cambodia turned out to be Vietnam fifty years ago in terms of the type of economic activity (85% rural farmers and fishermen), the extensive number of open air, small businesses, the markets for meat, fish, and vegetables, and the general condition of the roads and sanitation – all subpar. Cambodia has its challenges. Thailand, however, vies with Hong Kong and Shanghai as a vibrant, growing metropolis that is open for business 24 hours a day. Combining fantastic palaces and temples with modern architecture, Bangkok is a strong city in a competitive market. Singapore is likewise amazing and remarkable for its cosmopolitan feel. It is the most modern of all the Asian cities and truly benefits from being the only island city-state. Malaysia (two ports) and a quick stop back in Thailand closed out our Far East adventure before we headed to India.

General

We always start out our trip reports with the weather as we have expected some sea stories to tell but we have to continue to disappoint. Seas have remained calm to moderate. We had a single half-day of rain but the temperatures have consistently been in the 90s with moderate humidity. We have focused on personal water consumption and have a better routine. We did do a number of double excursions: one in the morning and one in the afternoon and tried to do the longer, walking tours early. The buses have been relatively new and all are air conditioned.

We have raved and raved about the food so we have almost started to take the great meals for granted. We say “almost” because we will need to hire a cook when we get home. We have not cooked, cleaned or driven a car in weeks. We do exercise and that has really made a difference. Viking brought on new staff in Hong Kong which included some new exercise instructors so now Lorraine is taking Tai Chi, Pranayama Yoga, and Yin Yoga. Not sure of the details but she is happy ... and flexible. I am still at the 2.5 mile run point (57.5 miles for the trip) and not sure I want to push much farther in terms of longer distance runs. Working on breathing and pace. At least we are in good shape for the walking tours which seem longer and over more uneven surfaces.

Entertainment has been a bit more modest lately with emphasis on “destination groups.” Our last night in Vietnam we had a performance from the Phu Dong Percussion Group, a group of musicians dedicated to national music played on a variety of traditional instruments. They played flutes, gongs, zithers, cymbals and a number of instruments made of bamboo and played like a xylophone. One instrument was actually a set of different sized flat stones which when struck with small hammers made a bell sound. The show was so interesting that we watched two performances. Next performer was Connor Bogart, a singer and lead in Broadway musical Jersey Boys who flew in from New York to do two performances. He has a great repertoire and terrific vocal range and control. We next had a destination performance from the House of Duriyapreneeet, a group formed in 1898 and still carrying on a tradition of Thai traditional music and dance. They were very acrobatic and beautifully choreographed. The next night we had Evelyn and Aiden, two-time world champion harmonica players. Impressive to say the least with a wide range of music. They were in perfect synch during their performance and easy to see

why they are so well known. The next group called Opera Interludes was a quartet of two men and two women who wore period dress when they sang classics from European operas. They have performed before British and European Royal families as well as in the top opera houses throughout Europe and the Far East. We had a comedian, Jeff Stevenson, who is a regular on the cruise circuit and he had very topical humor. Washington, DC gives him all the material he needs. Jeff was followed by the five-person group called Ukebox. These male ukulele players met in college at Liverpool University and were amazing. Lots of Beatles songs. They sing well too and had a nice rapport with the audience. Next up was an Illusionist named Jamie Allen. He fuses magic with high technology and did some clever magic with cellphones and computer-generated images. His most recent TV appearance was on "Penn and Teller: Fool Us." Last night we had an excellent singer named Paul Emmanuel who presented a show called "Unforgettable" which is a tribute to the career of Nate King Cole. Very polished with great vocal range. The guest lecturers have offered up to three presentations each day at sea focused on the history and culture of the Asian region. All have been very good but we find ourselves listening to the lectures on our cabin TV more than in the larger venues. We can hear better and be in more informal dress.

Excursions

1. **Sihanoukville (Cambodia).** With a population of approximately 16 million, Cambodia is smaller than most of its neighbors. The capital, Phnom Penh, has about 1.3 million while our port city Sihanoukville was relatively small at 95,000. While there was a 2-day side excursion to Angkor Wat, the largest Hindu temple in the world, we chose to see more of the local area. Our first tour in the morning was called Sihanoukville Discovery which was to hit the highlights of the city. We first visited a seaside village where we saw local boat building using mahogany to build fishing boats that have not changed in design or fabrication in generations.



Most large boats are powered by small car engines (gas or diesel) with extended propeller shafts mounted on the sides that operators raise and lower into the water. Smaller boats use the same technique but use Honda lawn mower engines! Strange but this configuration allows them to travel in very shallow waters.

We then visited Wat Krom, a temple with very nice colored statues of Buddha. As the temple was adjacent to a middle school, we stopped there to visit with the children who appeared to be from 6-8 years old. There were 800 students and 28 teachers and the school had several buildings built by US Navy construction units (2012) and the Chinese Embassy. Detracting from the experience was the presence of trash everywhere, especially plastic bottles. Another passenger asked our guide why the school did not take an hour with the 800 children to pick up the trash and the response was, "If we do that, there will just be more tomorrow." So, the children are learning that it is okay to just litter their school. Frankly, this attitude was prevalent everywhere we went in Cambodia where local governments simply could not handle their sanitation efforts. We left the school and went to a beach which was nice but trash filled. We finished the tour at a local market which was all open stalls. Again, reminded me of Vietnam 50 years ago. We took an afternoon tour called Ream National Park. We should have noted the quotation marks around the tour description in the Viking Brochure which indicated that the language was provided by a local tour company. In truth, what was to be a "refuge for hundreds of bird species and local rare animals" turned out to be a 45-minute boat trip through the Ream National Park where we saw a few egrets, one eagle, and a number of fishing traps. There was no visit to a local pepper and fruit plantation as advertised. We did stop at one house near the edge of a river village and saw how primitive the living conditions were for a multi-generational family. Banana and coconut trees circled the house and they had seven water buffalo. There were dozens of chickens running around. There was one very old motor bike as the family's mode of transportation. It was a long, hot, humid day with shared general concern that Cambodia badly lags her neighbors by every measure of society.

2. **Bangkok (Thailand, two days).** Thailand is everything Cambodia and Vietnam want to be. It is a large country of 69 million with the capital, Bangkok over 8.3 million. The city boasts a metro rail system as well as a monorail and the skyline is like Hong Kong or Shanghai but more spread out. The only challenge we faced was that the Viking Sun docked at the main port some 85 miles south of the capital. The port is about 30 years old and is very, very large with container ships coming and going. Thailand actually builds over one million Japanese cars a year for export. While Thailand is 60 percent agrarian (rice, coconuts, pineapples) and has a large fishing fleet, the other forty percent of the population are in high skill fields like medicine and technology. There is an abundance of cars and motor scooters, the road networks are first class and motorcycles are not allowed on main throughways.

Our first tour was called Pattaya and the Sanctuary of Truth. Pattaya is a beach resort community which I had actually visited some fifty years ago on an R&R from Vietnam. Beautiful beach with all modern water sports.



The Sanctuary of Truth

The Sanctuary of Truth is a castle sponsored by a single family and begun in 1981 that is scheduled to be completed in 2050.



It is almost 350 feet tall and architecturally like a cathedral with four massive wings. It is entirely made of iron wood imported from Malaysia and every surface is hand carved figures or designs. Currently, there are over 200 wood carvers either restoring older portions of the castle

or building new sections. Note: minimum wage in Thailand is 10 dollars per day and the wood carvers start at 12 dollars per day. The castle is simply indescribable. Google Sanctuary of Truth, Thailand for pictures and more facts about this “sky-high castle.”

On the second day in Thailand we travelled to Bangkok for the City Tour and Grand Palace. The bus trip was over 2.5 hours up and three hours back ... a long ride. We did a quick city tour and had lunch at the Princess Hotel which was very, very nice and then off to the Palace. Unfortunately, the Palace had closed that morning for a royal ceremony so as it opened in the afternoon, 25,000 tourists all tried to tour at once. It was poorly organized by the Thais in terms of four ticket collectors taking paper tickets from thousands of people and everyone pushing and pressing to get into the compound. Ironically, the worst offenders were the Chinese followed by Japanese tour groups who simply muscled their way through the crowds. Not a problem generally but for us, average age 70, it was very taxing. The Palace itself is stunning and well worth the visit. A highlight is the famous Emerald Buddha.



Wonderful tour but then, the long ride home to the ship.

3. **Koh Samui (Thailand).** The second largest island in Thailand after Phuket, Koh Samui with a population of 65,000 is a major tourist destination for Americans and Europeans. There are luxury hotels with all the amenities and local transportation is very good. While there were excursions offered to ride elephants and see wildlife parks by 4X4, we chose a Beach Excursion to recuperate from the previous long days in humid weather and recharge. The water was 80 degrees with moderate waves and there was a cooling breeze. The mini-bus ride was about 30 minutes from the tender port to the ship so we only had about three hours at the beach but it was just about the right amount of time. We returned to the ship for a 3:00 PM departure heading to Singapore.

4. **Singapore (two days).** The city/state has a population of 5.6 million of which 1.6 million are non-residents. Despite its small size, Singapore is the third largest banking center in the world and the second largest port in the world. This thriving economy is based on commerce as the country imports 95% of its needs. It has been reclaiming land from the sea for over 50 years and has a city master plan that allows it to let reclaimed land lie undisturbed for 12-15 years before building projects commence. Housing is mostly vertical but built in clusters around the city and connected by above and below ground rail systems. Chewing gum is illegal and trash dumping fines are extremely high and automobiles are restricted to those 10 years and newer and are charged an excise tax of between 175-225%. These facts contribute to a very, very clean city with a very small driving population. On the first day we took the City Tour and National Orchid Garden excursion which was split between a bus tour through the India and China sections of the city and full tour of the National Orchid Gardens. The latter were simply spectacular! There were thousands of different orchids (original species and hybrids) all arrayed in themes around the main garden. A highlight was the VIP Orchid Garden dedicated to presidents, prime ministers and world figures who receive a specially bred orchid variety named after them when they visit the garden. We saw a memorial orchid to Princess Diana as well as one to Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher. On our second day we took the Iconic Singapore Tour which was very near our port and started with a tour of the national Gardens by the Bay. This futuristic garden park is fully enclosed and contains over one million plants. The domed garden is ingeniously temperature controlled by super cooled water passing under all of the concrete walkways through the park. The plants were all oversized and everything seemed to be blooming at once. Outside of the dome there are artificial metal gardens shaped like trees that are over 150 feet tall that support an abundance of vines, orchids, and ferns. While the complex is only six years old, greenery covers over 75 feet of each "tree." Just amazing. We then left the gardens for the Marina Bay Sands Hotel and Skypark. Six buildings pair to form three buildings of the hotel which then form three pillars 57 stories high. Bridging the three combined buildings is what looks like a cruise ship. This "Skypark" has an observation deck, restaurants, clubs and a huge pool which gives one a 360 degree view of the city. We took pictures from the top and we are including one with this trip report. The last part of the excursion was a river cruise through the heart of the city which allowed us to see the colonial waterfront and other city highlights. Singapore gets an A+ among all of the cities we have visited thus far.

5. **Kuala Lumpur (Malaysia.)** As noted in a previous report, Malaysia is split in half by the South China Sea and Kuala Lumpur is the capital located on the mainland. The population of the city is about 1.7 million while the immediate urban population is just over 7.25 million. The main port, however, is in the Klang Valley, some 45 miles south of the city requiring an almost two hour drive to reach the center of the city. We took the Glimpse of Kuala Lumpur tour. For the first time on the entire cruise we had moderate rain to start the excursion. Our first stop in the rain was fortunately the National Museum which was very well done in terms of the variety and quality of exhibits and displays. All exhibits had explanations in Malay and English. From the museum we went to the National Monument which is a large bronze statue of soldiers and is dedicated to those who fought in the World Wars and in the Communist Insurgency in the 1950s. The rain let up as we drove by the famous central train station, several large mosques and Independence Square for pictures. At our last stop we took pictures of the Petronas Towers which are over 1,500 feet high and connected by a two-story sky bridge at the 41st and 42nd floors. For many years the twin towers were the tallest in the world and still represent the height of architectural achievement in Malaysia. Under mostly clear skies, we made the trip back to the Viking Sun in a little over one hour.

6. **George Town (Penang, Malaysia).** The city is on Penang Island off the coast of Malaysia and is Malaysia's second largest city at 705,000. It is a unique combination of Buddhist and Taoist temples and colorful "clan houses." We opted for the longest excursion (7.5 hours) called Penang in a Day which started with a drive into the hills and 250 steps to visit Kek Loc Si temple, the largest Chinese temple in Southeast Asia. There we took pictures of the fourth largest Reclining Buddha at 108 feet long. We returned to the bus and travelled to a Burmese Buddhist Temple which reflects the diversity of the local culture. We then travelled to the north of Penang to visit the huge Penang Butterfly Farm. It had just started to rain so we hustled into the building to find that the roof is permeable ... so we used umbrellas to tour the facility. It was actually more realistic to be in that tropical environment than something artificial. Naturally, it stopped raining after we left the Butterfly Farm. We then travelled to an open air fruit market where Lorraine was braver than me in trying Durian fruit which has a pungent odor but tastes like a creamy melon.

7. **Patong Beach (Phuket, Thailand.)** With a population of just over 600,000 Phuket is home to a number of migrant workers, international expats (many from the United States), Thais working on the island but living in other provinces, and locals. While coconuts and other fruits and vegetables have long been a commercial base, tourism has outstripped all other economic efforts. There are a number of 5-star international hotels and numerous restaurants and activities catering to tourists. We noted a large number of Japanese tourists as we took a tour called Panoramic Phuket. One can actually reach Phuket from the mainland via bridges but we anchored in the Patong Beach Harbor and used local tenders to bring in passengers from the Viking Sun. The tour was only a half day so we started by visiting (yet again) another temple in Chalong. The temple was multi-story and Lorraine went to the third floor and took a picture of a 120' white marble Buddha on a nearby hill. We took lots of photos around the temple which was quite busy. We then drove to the southern-most tip of the island called Promthep Cape which provides terrific long views of the Andaman Sea and beautiful Nai Harn Bay. We looked at

a four-faced Buddha surrounded by 100+ elephant statues that people have brought and visited a monument dedicated to the founder of the Thailand Navy as well as a lighthouse. It was 93 degrees and 90+ percent humidity so we were happy to return to the bus and then return by tender to the Viking Sun.

We are actually looking forward to several sea days as we cross the Andaman Sea and the Bay of Bengal to Chennai, India. Our visit to this part of Southeast Asia is hard to describe. Right now we have a series of impressions of cultural diversity, economic disparity, active capitalism, subdued communism, and strong religious influences. All the shrines and temples we visit are active in terms of monks very visible and the local populace worshipping faithfully. Whatever the predominant religion is in a country often has a direct correlation to the secular success of that nation. There is great tolerance of all religions and often this is reflected in architecture which easily blends Buddhist, Muslim, Hindu and Chinese cultural artifacts.

There are certainly issues. Thailand, for example, is outgrowing its infrastructure. Streets are lined with telephone poles weighed down with wires and transformers. Breaks in lines are not repaired but new lines are layered over old lines. We cannot imagine a fire in some of these towns. Sanitation is wonderful in Singapore and woeful in Cambodia. The rest of the countries we visited fall in between. There is excellent medical care but one either has private medical insurance or endures long waits for treatment. Despite the evidence of ethnic cooperation, we still sensed animosity among the Chinese, Japanese, Koreans, Thais, Malays, etc. Some of this is historical (Japanese occupation during World War II) but much of it appears more recent. The Chinese are benefactors to some and a threat to others. Borders between countries are still sources of friction.

One other observation about excursions. Lorraine and I had deliberately decided not to take some of the 2-4 day side trips (example to Angkor Wat or The Great Wall) as we wanted to see all the ports and there is a lot more involved in leaving and returning to the ship as it moves from port to port. One hundred of our fellow passengers opted for the Angkor Wat 2-day side trip which was well received but on the way back to the ship only one third of the passengers could be accommodated on a flight while the remaining 64 passengers had to wait for a second plane. That plane never took off, the passengers had to return to a hotel (after spending six hours in the airport with no chairs) and then took a flight the next morning to join the ship in Thailand. No one had packed for an extra night, some had tours booked for Thailand, and it was difficult to get information to everyone in a timely manner. In the end it was all sorted out but trying for everyone and a reminder that flying local airways can be problematical. Most folks took the detour in stride but some did not. As they say on the ship, are you a tourist or a traveler?

On to India!