

Traveldiary Brigitte & Heinz

Southeast Asia: Vietnam, Laos and Thailand's beaches



Chapter 23

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After 8 pleasant, though partly very cold weeks in Switzerland, we packed and sacked, reducing our belongings from probably over 100 kg, when we were still travelling with our Twingo, to 16kg and 12 kg respectively.

With this on our backs, we stood at the busstop in the only 5 degrees cold breeze at dawn of Dec. 6th, in Merenschwand, keen to leave Europe.

Thailand's beaches: Backpackers Idyll and Sex Tourism!

We went to Zürich-Airport, where we could manage to check-in our luggage all the way over 3 flights to Phuket, even though we held separate tickets with Austrian Airline via Vienna to Bangkok, and another flight to Phuket with Thai Int. Airways. This way, it was 100 Euros cheaper, but on the end, we realized that we were sitting next to those people, who had booked through with Austrian all the same way, as these flights were code-shared.

The first leg to Vienna, was one of these new intra-European "no-frills flights", where all food and drinks were at extra cost. The Austrian flight to Bangkok in [Thailand](#) then, was operated by Lauda-Air and had good service and food, with drinks being served about every half an hour. Every passenger had his own screen for in-flight movies etc.

As the plane flew into darkness before it was 16:00 h, it helped us overcome jetlag, as we arrived at [Phuket](#) on the next morning at 9 o'clock local time, which was 6 hours ahead of our departure time.

With a minibus, we were driven almost in front of the guesthouse, we had chosen from our guidebook Lonely Planet. It was nicely located on a hill at Kata-Beach a bit away from the mainroad. For the price of 300 Baht, which is 6 Euros, we got a basic, but pretty big bungalow(20m²) in bricks with cold shower.

Our first impression of Thailand, 10 years after our last visit, was that it had gotten quite a bit more modern. We saw roads, which had nice plants in the middle, instead of potholes everywhere. The rim was quite clean and sometimes even had a footpath.

Although, most businesses were still in small Thai-Shops, we also noticed a big Tesco Shopping Centre and Leaderprice Superdiscounter. Bicycles seem to have extincted, only Motorbikes and many pretty new cars drove around. As already 10 years ago, the biggest car often stood in front of a shed with a leaky roof. Even though, today there were many less of those poor houses and many more luxury ones.

Kata village was not as touristy as feared and surely better than Patong Beach, Phuket's most popular one, that consisted of several kilometres of Hotelcomplexes, restaurants, tailors, souvenir- and streetshops and hordes of vendors, runing after the sought-after tourist's money.

However, what apparently was once a secluded bay with a relaxed atmosphere, described in Lonely Planet guide, got replaced by a mile long beach-promenade. The entire bay was lined with several rows of deck-chairs, occupying the beach, including all the shady spots underneath the trees, what we didn't like at all, as we prefer to lye on a towel only. Unfortunately, people told us, Krabi's beaches became the same. As we still wanted our skin to get used to the tropical sun, we put on our bathing suits for probably the first time in 10 years! The water was lovely warm and miraculously clear, despite the lack of proper sewage systems...



The food was still as good as expected! Our stomachs enjoyed everything - even what we shouldn't have taken by popular believe; salads or fruitshakes with ice. As nothing happened after that, we ordered such things again and again. Those drinks are for us among the highlights of the region and imagine, how awful a bananashake would taste without ice in 35 degrees.

Some dishes are very spicy, others are not, but they all are very very inexpensive and it's still possible to get a filling meal for 1 Euro or less. That doesn't mean, that we wouldn't often eat that modest, as there are always so many temptations on the menu.

For a touristy place like Phuket, we found an amazing number of real Thai restaurants and food-stalls. Of course, for those who think they can't handle Thai-food, there are a surprising number of "ethnic" restaurants, as Danish Kro's, Svenska kokar's, Italian, French (the only one we couldn't resist after passing it daily for 10 days) and a Swiss Restaurants... where we started going for breakfast, as they served those delicious breads, even braided ones, which we prefer to toasts or rice, as the Thai people eat.

Most other tourists had breakfast in their restaurants and the reason why these foreign restaurants were booming, was most probably because most people were too afraid, their stomachs couldn't handle Thai food. Of course we understand, that they were afraid to spend some of their precious holidays in the small corner.

What was hardest for us, was to acclimatize to the humid heat. Especially in the first two days, we were switting day and night and took one shower after another. Luckily, temperatures will remain at 32 degrees during the day and only a few less at night, and they will certainly not raise up to 40 degrees as we experienced it last summer in France.

Most other tourists, were in Phuket on a package deal, and many were rather Luxury tourists. No wonder, everybody was constantly bothered on the street by Indian tailors, who seemed to believe, everybody needs to return with some suits made to measure, and they couldn't believe that Heinz wouldn't even wear such things for money...(unless it exceeds 1 Million \$ a day...)

After 10 days, we started looking for a hideaway, to pass the other people's holiday-period. Although we knew, about the monsoon, our choice fell for the other side of the peninsula. We hoped there would be less tourists on Koh Samui / Koh Pha Ngan and definitely more of an independent traveller's class.

So, on December 19th, we boarded a plane to Samui Island which flew low over the most beautiful Pha Ngan Halang Bay, with its tiny steep rocky islands. After 50 Minutes flight, we landed, just in time to catch the first boat to [Koh Pha Ngan](#), which made us arrive before midday and only 2 hours after leaving Phuket.

This was a place we had known 10 years ago and it was incredible, how much it had grown. Now it had almost 100 Bungalow operators, a sealed road to the mainvillage in the north and a proper ferry-pier. But still it's low-key, the beaches had NO deck-chairs and there was no 5 star resort. The tourist village of Haadrin nestles

between the sunset- and sunrise-beach, which are only a few hundred metres apart and both very beautiful. Inland, it's a bit dirtier and dustier than on Phuket Island. There were only small restaurants and because almost nobody had breakfast included, there was a big selection of delicious breakfast-items everywhere, as pancakes, homemade yoghurts and also a good choice of fruitshakes, coffeeshakes and everything the shorttime tourist wouldn't normally order.

Here we also could have a look around shops without being pressured to buy.

We were right, people here were jounger, mainly backpackers, who stayed longer and travelled independently, in contrary

to Phuket's package-folks. Most of the travelers here have more time than money. There were many freaky 'Raver's' and also those people, who pretend they have no money, so they take only the most basic bungalow and hardly eat well. At the same time, they don't realize, how much money they spend each night for



booze. A beer costs twice as much as a basic meal and a cocktail might be equivalent to one night's accommodation.

The locals learned well, how to squeeze money out of these guys. In the evening, tables are being put up, along the road, selling so-called "Cocktail-Set's", consisting of one bottle of Whisky, Vodka or so, one tin of Softdrink plus a sweetened colouring drink. All this comes packed in a cute plastic bucket, as children normally use it to play in the sand. All the liquids are poured together in the bucket and sipped with straws. Now the kids head for the beach, partying half the night away to very loud "techno bom-bom-sound".

Not only on the beach, but on the whole island of Koh Pha Ngan, you find freaky hippyfolks. Especially during the New Year's holiday, and even more during the full-moon party soon thereafter. There weren't only Westerners, but also many Thai and other Asians, from Japan to Malaysia (does Allah see everything?). And also they were certainly not the average citizens of their countries but rather funky jouths.

On the other hand, in contrary to most other of Thailand's beach resorts, there weren't any Girlie-Bar's at all. Here weren't those singles with a lack of selfconfidence, who believe, sex has to be bought. Sure, there were many singles around; guys and galls, but they were of the sort who know, how to "help each other" and they wouldn't even think about paying for such "services".

Another new thing, we were surprised by, were the many internet-cafes, that all provided e-mail access for only 1 Baht per minute, that totals to about 1.15 Euro/hour. Alone in the tourist-village of Haadrin, which isn't that big, we counted over 50 Cybercafé's. Competition was so fierce, some tried to attract customers by providing free coffee or aircon. On top, there were many Guesthouses, providing one to five Computers for their guests.



What bothered us, were the loud Videos, which were played almost non-stop in most of the restaurants, starting from 11 a.m.. After a while, we found a few quiet alternatives, that probably cooked even better, but also a bit dearer than the others. Never mind, ear-plugs would have cost as well... There were also a few restaurants in traditional Thai style, where you sit on cushions on the floor and have a low table in front of you.

We had a Bungalow on Haad-Rin's quiet sunset beach side, a few hundred metres away from the ferry-pier. It was a large new Bungalow in bricks, costing only 250 Baht/5 Euro. With this, we were lucky not to pay the inflated high-season prices, as they were charged only on the "sun rise beach" where all the parties are being held and the guests were forced to listen and pay for all this noise ...

Christmas passed by wonderfully normal. Most shops and restaurants had "business as usual", although, a few establishments held a X-Mas Party, which was rather a disco with DJ's than anything traditional, for which they wouldn't have had the right guests.

As well, the New Year's Eve party, was celebrated mainly on the beach, similar to the here so famous Full-moon Party, but with some fireworks on top of it. Foodstalls and bars that had been put up for the occasion, made good money and on the next morning we saw all the garbage and the last drunks on the beach. They were meanwhile sunburnt while the locals collected the rubbish around them..

Soon after the full-moon party, that was on 6th of January, most of the people left Haad Rin and it became very quiet.

We decided, to go ahead with our travel planning and were happy to be able to arrange a flight ticket and visa to Vietnam, right from that spot. This was done through one of these shops, of which more than 50 existed,

that offer at the same time: laundry service, money exchange, internet-connections, travel agent services and what ever else, the travellers were willing to pay for. Thai people really know how to organise things well and with their very reliable postal system, we could just pay, sit and wait. Already on the next day, we got our flight tickets and 8 days later, we received back our passports to which Vietnam visa had been added without even us having had to fill in any form or giving a signature - easy, really easy!

To see something more of the island (or to sample different restaurants...), we decided to spend some time on Tong Nai Pan Yai Beach further up north. However, as it was raining very hard the morning we wanted to leave, we had to postpone this excursion. The boat, which we wanted to take, was cancelled because of the rough sea and the the dirt track that leads there, becomes impassable even for 4-wheel drive vehicles, if it rains like that. But a few days later, it was all right and we arrived at this quiet and wonderful place. Only about 10 Bungalow operators existed, all of which have their own beachside restaurants with similar menus and standards. It looks as if they want to make it grow as Haad Rin, but probably they don't realize, that this would result in a drop of prizes, which currently are a bit inflated for some services and goods (up to 200% more than elsewhere).

After six days, we were ready to leave Koh Pha Ngan and waited for the boat to Haad Rin and Koh Samui. Although it was a sunny morning, the sea was so rough, they had to cancel the boat again. As Thais are always very good in organizing, soon two 4-wheel-drive cars were arranged, to bring the 14 stranded Tourists on a steep "riverbed-like" road, through the jungle to Haad Rin. From there, we could board the bigger

ferryboat, shaking us over to [Koh Samui](#).

With a Taxi, we were driven past Chaweng to Lamai-Beach. Both have grown tremendously in the last 10 years. Chaweng, which was only a 5 km stretch of beach and some bungalows & restaurants then, has now become almost a city. Three paralell roads, lined with endless tourist shops and businesses were full with people and vendors. Many major supermarket- and fastfood-chains were represented.



Lamai, which was our destination, has stayed quite a bit smaller. Although, we had difficulty recognizing places, two things, we still found: the bakery, which still served delicious crusty breads, and the guesthouse, in which we now stayed again. That room has been rather one of the more luxurious ones on our last trip, but on this trip, it's been the simplest and smallest - probably also, because it was the oldest. Newer places have set new standards in general and also higher prices.

For the 6 different rooms or bungalows, we stayed in, this time in Thailand, we paid each 200-400 Baht (4-8 Euro) per night. For this, we got quite similar comfort: all were built in bricks, equipped with showers and western toilets, but didn't have hot water. The cheapest bungalow was at the same time the newest, best and biggest.

The boom had also changed some things for the better: Today, we found many good restaurants with a wide selection of Asian and Western dishes with a nice atmosphere. Typically, they consisted of a roof only, open walls on 2 - 3 sides, with nice furniture and exotic flower-decoration, so it was pleasantly airy and good to watch the street- or beachlife around.

Further, it had become quite easy to get a good tender steak, at reasonable prices, whereas 10 years ago, anything else than diced chicken meat was very chewy.

In contrary, most of those restaurants hanging their "video-programme" outside, rather than their menu, were gone (hopefully, this serves as an example for Haadrin).

Today, street- and beach-hawkers, as well as taxi- and boat-drivers, were licensed, wearing numbered T-shirts.

We felt, that traffic-noise and pollution caused by vehicles, had reduced dramatically, as drivers now didn't use the horn that often anymore and exhausts have been left in place, even amended with catalysators.

More good things to say about the new times, include the disappearance of the packs of stray sick dogs, that used to annoy the sunbathers on the beach.

Thailand is now very well equipped with automatic teller machines, accepting almost any international bank- and credit-card, even from our small local bank.

On the places with many independent tourists, most shops tagged their items with realistic prices, so the bargaining-skilled did not need to constantly proof their ability. Of course, the places which were mainly frequented by package-tourists, shop-tenants were sometimes trying to lure customers in as vultures, trying to miss no chance for a rip-off, with their "special offers".

Lamai was still mainly catering for independent holidayers and backpackers. A good mix of couples and singles, males and females and unavoidably, also the sex-tourist. We Naturists, felt it was a pity, that it's unacceptable to bare it all on the beach, if we saw what's going on in the huge bar-scene along the busy mainstreet. There, the CSW (commercial sex workers) try to lure in customers, wearing only a "sexy next-to-nothing" and that seems acceptable... Apparently, all is on offer, not only Thai girls serving Western and Arabic or Russian clients, but also Eastern-European Ladies serving mainly Asian Tourists and black Africans, being at the disposal of Japanese woman's desires. Plus a scene of Homosexuals and Transvestites, of course.

We just arrived on the first day of the Chinese New Year, on 23rd of January and many Asian Tourists were flocking in as well. They booked mainly into middle-class hotels, so the Western Tourists, who normally stay in those places, had to go to budget accommodation, as there were no real luxury resorts on Lamai-Beach, only in Chaweng.

The increasing number of Asian tourists, on all the places we had stayed, was certainly an indicator of the region's economic growth, despite their crisis a few years ago. To notice this, means there must be much more tourism under way, since beach-resorts usually were not among the Asian's favourites, since most don't like to get tanned.

Thailand was among the best performing countries, which was a reason, why so many Burmese people came working here as cheap labour, earning much more than at home, as several of them confirmed to us.

Even Thai street vendors, sales assistants and motorcycle-taxidriver, used handy's and ate take-away at food-stalls, rather than cooking at home. Restaurants normally didn't make coconut juice by themselves anymore, as a few years ago. Tins weren't made for export only. Times, when the washing was done by hand, were gone now, wasing machines weren't used in laundries only, and moreoften also tumblers were in use. On the other hand, the rubbish, washed onto the beach each day, was still collected by hand.

We had a good time at Lamai Beach and were surprised, how many other Swiss people were there, as we had rarely seen any, during the last 7 weeks. There were so many, we wondered, whether there were any left in Switzerland, during cold January. On the other hand, we were amused to understand, what was beeing said



around us, like when four satisfied countrymates mentioned, while leaving a restaurant: "that food was so excellent and for a price ... honestly, in Switzerland, we couldn't even get dog-food..."

On Feb. 3rd, we left Koh Samui, ready to go to Vietnam. So we boarded a plane to Bangkok, where we just had to get the seat-allocation for our second flight to Ho Chi Minh City, as our luggage was already checked through. However, Lufthansa discovered a problem with its jumbojet, first delaying the flight, and finally cancelling it, as the necessary sparepart wasn't available. All the other passengers got their immigration-departure card back, and the airline brought them to a hotel in town at their expenses.

As we had gone through immigration in Koh Samui, we were a special case (...) and it would have involved a lot of paperwork, if we had left the transit-area of the airport. So, Lufthansa booked us into a hotel, right inside the airport, which wasn't anything special, but cost them a fortune. We also got vouchers for dinner and brekky (lousy) and early next morning, we were put on a flight with Thai International airways, bringing us to our destination in style.

Vietnam: money hungry people and a communist government

[Vietnam](#) immediately gave us many impressions: very chaotic traffic, almost only motorbikes on the road, dirty pavements that were mainly used to park the bikes, but also to sit-,eat-, and work on. The Communist Party's rule was visible through many propaganda-posters and uniformed government employees.

By walking along [Ho Chi Minh City](#)'s endless streets, to which many of its 7 mio. inhabitants still often refer to as Saigon, we got a more in-depth look into Vietnamese life. The city-center didn't have many modern

buildings, and only a few banks and first class hotels rose a bit higher than the surrounding buildings, but it was nothing, compared to other major Asian towns we had seen before. In a way, it was fascinating, to find a country, that still was so "original Asian". Unfortunately, a lot of rubbish was just thrown onto the street, waiting and smelling, until it was being collected at night. As we had seen later all over Vietnam, the pavements were often used as the extended living rooms of homes, or by street-hawkers, to set-up their small business. On several occasions, we had seen that people were being treated with Chinese medicine, accupuncture, massages or ear-waxing, directly on the dirty pavement. Also hairdressers, tailors and foodstalls had set-up there. Of course, in front of most

craftsmen's shops, the pavement was reserved for them to work on, instead of the dark workshop. Was any stretch of pavement left free, then it didn't take long, and it became a parking lot, sometimes, they charged even officially a parking fee.

For us, it was a miracle, how Vietnamese manage the mingling of the traffic. Apart from some traffic-lights, most rules were ignored and the law of the stronger was the only one, that was really followed. Luckily, sofar, there were mainly bicycles and motorcycles on the road, that didn't speed too much, so the risk of fatal accidents was not that high, at least in the cities; overland, it looked different. It was quite a common sight, that up to 4 people rode on one bike. Horror to imagine, they all could afford a car... Against pollution and suntan, almost one third of riders wore mouth- and nose-masks. Of course, there were busses and trucks blending into the traffic, which were either pretty old, or



pretty new, whereas cars usually were of modern makes, but there were really not that many. Everyone tried to horn his way free and some motorbikes had their horn replaced by the sound of a truck, trying to give themselves more weight... To cross a 20 m wide road on foot, with maybe 20 Motorcycles next to each other in one lane, driving in different directions, on both sides of the road, was a real challenge!

As a tourist, it was not possible to walk a long distance in peace, as we were constantly being bothered by motorcycle-taxidriver and triksha-drivers, who insistingly tried to involve us in a conversation, desperately trying to get overpaying customers, sometimes following us for several hundred meters, before giving up.

The traditional way of carrying 2 baskets hanging on a stick, over the shoulder, could often be seen, even in big cities. The traditional cone-hats and old fashioned clothing (sometimes looking like a night-robe) were still more often seen, than those young people, with fancy jeans.

Contrary to our expectations, we found a few ATM's and so we could withdraw the maximum amount of 2 mio. Dong, which are equivalent to about 100 Euros. What an easy way, to become a millionaire!



We joined a tour to the [Mekong Delta](#), just south of HCMC. It was interesting to see, how the people live along this famous river, which was sometimes wide as a lake. Many houses were built on stilts and trade and transport were mainly done by boat.

Next, we visited [Dalat](#), in the central highlands. Up there, it was substantially colder, especially at night. So we wore long trousers and sleeves not only to please the conservative locals. Dalat was very popular with Vietnamese tourists and it had quite a big replica of the Eiffeltower - not the only one in the country. When we left back to the coast, the bus drove down the plateau, passing by many fertile vegetable and fruit orchards, where strawberries, grapes, apples, tomatoes and many exotic vegis were grown.

[Nha Trang](#), our following stop, was a city of 300'000 inhabitants. Along the sea, it was made up, to resemble the wide Spanish beach-boulevards. Coming away from the waterfront, however, it looked narrow and dirty as anywhere else. Often, there were open sewage channels, along the pavements, which pleased the rats, who already were king of the rubbish, that was thrown onto the roads. We walked out, over a new bridge, passing by dusty shanty-towns along the river, starkly contrasted by colourful, pretty fishing-boats lying before them.

Throning just behind, were some old [Cham towers](#) that were Hindu temples, built in bricks during the ethnic Cham Dynasties, between the 7th-12th centuries.

Another contrast: Internet-access was very popular among local teenagers, widely available and very cheap - often 0.15 Euro/hour. Even ASDN connection, Webcam and scanners were included.



One of our bigger annoyances, were all these hawkers, who tried to sell their stuff everywhere. Even in the most unsuitable situations, they would bother us, like when we were unloading our backpacks, boarding a bus or crossing a busy street... If we stopped with a bus or sat in a restaurant, somebody came round every couple of minutes, asking whether we wanted this or that. But tourists weren't their only target. We discovered, that they bothered Vietnamese just as well. These vendors tried to sell anything; often copies of some expensive

brands of watches, sunglasses or clothing. The most astonishing of all, were photocopied books of bestsellers as Harry Potter or travel-guides from Lonely Planet. The cover looked very professional, but flipping through the pages, you could quickly see the differences.

They are real copycats, they didn't only copy *things*. If one Vietnamese started a successful business or restaurant, the neighbours didn't hesitate, to start a competing company, offering the same services, sometimes even under the same, or almost the same name. The weirdest example of this, was the restaurant, opened by a deaf-and-dumb man that found recommendation in many travel-guides, who now has two "deaf-and-dumb " competitors next door...

Tourist accommodation was one of the pleasant sides of Vietnam. Although they did not have real rock-bottom deals, as in neighbouring Thailand, we got luxury hotelrooms for far less than the same standard would have cost over there. Normally, we got new doublerooms, equipped with western bathrooms, hot water, minibar, telephone, airconditioning and satellite-TV, roomservice and daily fresh towels included, for as little as 5.50 - 8.00 Euros.

Hotel-reception desks were always well staffed and usually they were very insisting about selling their tours and onward-tickets, asking us about three times per day, if we needed anything else. Once somebody said, Vietnamese are quite "money hungry", and after 3 weeks in this country, we think he had a point.

While watching TV, we realized, there were never any bad news - how refreshing! Even in the Vietnamese news edition, broadcast in English or French, we only "learned" about how many good things The (communist) Party did for its people. How foreign countries helped build new hospitals or schools, how farmers succeeded in breeding frogs, cultivating flowers or vegetables. There was never any comment or critique, and except for the weather and football results, no mentioning of any foreign country... When we had been to China 12 years ago, we had obtained much more and better information, about what was going on in the world, even if there were things that didn't please the party.

Although it was possible to receive satellite programs in Vietnam, the decoders were set up, that only those programs could get through, the government would agree with. In some places, we could receive BBC worlds news, but they were kind of "dubbed" by Vietnamese talking, that didn't sound like translations at all, making it certainly very difficult to understand, for someone who wasn't very familiar with the english language, worse, if he could understand Vietnamese. During the advertisement blocks, interrupting films, a short break was accorded by showing party-propaganda, rather than western style adds.

There was also an English-language newspaper available, with a content as on TV, so we quite agreed with the sarcastic comment of Lonely Planet Guidebook "it's best use is, to wrap fish".

As chicken-flu was at its peak, beginning of 2004, the state TV was assuring its people, how successful the government was working, to bring it under control. While our parents were worrying at home, about our health, "The Party" had already banned all poultry and eggs trade, first in Ho Chi Minh City and 10 days later, also in the rest of the country. This posed a real threat on our diet...



As all over Asia, chicken, ducks and eggs, were an important part of daily nutrition and this meant, that the menu-cards were now reduced to less than half of their usual choice. We now had to miss out on many delicious items, as zabaglione or pancakes, that would otherwise have been available. Some French influence was still left behind

in many of the food-stalls, restaurants and shops: crusty baguettes, famous cheese-spread "la vache qui rit", butter "beurre du president", flan caramel (before the total ban) and wine- or pepper-sauce on beefsteaks and filet mignon. Further, strong coffee and yoghurt were consumed by everybody. By looking around, we also could find croissants, pain au chocolat and pain au raisin.

Surely, we survived bird-flu, but the pigs, now occasionally sold in chicken-cages on the markets, certainly didn't. There was never a shortage in food of any other choice.

What we experienced as the typical kitchen, was strongly influenced by Chinese dishes - with less oil, and by Thai dishes - with less spices. The most traditional thing, was white rice-paper, in which anything could be rolled in. Sometimes it came pre-made, sometimes it was to be prepared by ourselves with a choice of herbs, salad, noodles, meat or fish served on the plate. This was the unfried, fresh Vietnamese springroll.

The people apparently got the reputation, of being the "Prussians of Asia", which meant they eat at a given time, rise early - often at 5 am, and go to bed when their chicken did - as long as they had some... Everything closed really early! By 10 pm we were usually the last people on the streets and felt as if we were revellers...

After a few days in Nha Trang, we spontaneously hopped off the bus in [Qui Nhon](#), where it had stopped for lunch. This place didn't see so many tourists yet, and we soon realized, that we were a kind of curiosity and it was nice to get to know one place, that was at least a bit off the beaten tourist-track. Many children and also adults, would call "Hello" and were obviously turning around after us. Some naughty children were even asking for money, while hiding their Coke behind the back. Although, we had occasionally seen some beggars, there weren't as many, as we were warned of. It seems that the government could suppress this "business" at least in areas with many tourists around.

It also understood how to guide foreign tourists, including independent Backpackers, to the places, ready to show. Several buscompanies, partly owned by the government, offered very comfortable and reliable daily services at a rock-bottom price, in between major tourist destinations. On all these places - only about 8 in the whole country - a good choice of cheap sightseeing-tours, was on offer. To reach any other place, it was usually necessary, to arrange a private tour with a guide, which could be pretty expensive. Sometimes, this involved also permits to go to some places and some Expats living here, told us, they had not been welcome and were soon questioned by the police, if they went just a few kilometers off the tourist-cities.

[Hoi An](#), our next destination, was certainly the nicest place, we've visited in Vietnam, even though, it was the most touristy one! It's old center has been declared a World Heritage Site, thanks to the fact, that it's old buildings have neither been destroyed, renovated nor replaced by new ones. This charming little place was nestled along the Perfume river and surrounded by rice-paddies and beaches.

Usually, upon arrival in a town by bus, the touristcoach was recommending a hotel or two, where they certainly got commission, before bringing the passengers to the guesthouses, they asked for. Often, these recommendations were new hotels, a bit outside of the center, eager to get first guests, even if they paid next to nothing... The most luxurious, we had in Hoi An. We got a posh room in the new three-star hotel [PHUONG NAM HOTEL](#), for the promotion price of just over 6 Euros, bicycles and internet access were included, to spoil us even more...

Hoi An's inhabitants specialised in crafts for the tourists. Tailorshops and souvenir-making was big business. For those who liked or needed to dress-up, the most elegant suits could be ordered at very cheap prices.

Heinz tried to order a casual airy type of shorts, but got stuck in cultural misunderstanding. Not that the Lady, that took his measurements, wouldn't have understood his English well enough. And not that Heinz wouldn't have said clearly and many times over, how wide he wanted the shorts to be... As all over Asia, cloths are meant to cover everything, never the less, figure-hugging. So that Lady just couldn't imagine, that he really wanted shorts so loose and what he got, fit almost as a pair of Latex knickers...



The cheap cost of labour was also reflected in the fact, that tearing down a large concrete building, was still done by hand, with no help of machinery. Heavy labour was also often done by delicate women. We came across many items, manufactured in Vietnam, which were also sold in Europe. In order to obtain the eco-label "clef vert" (green key) for example, many French (Naturist) resorts replaced their plastic garden furniture, with environment friendly wooden ones. After seeing such tables and chairs all over the country here, and seeing some factories, where they were made, we were told that most of the wood comes from Malaysia - from the rainforest ?

After a week in Hoi An, we proceeded to [Hué](#), to which the road led over a very well built and scenic pass-road. Fortunately, the touristbus we took, was in good shape, but for many other vehicles, it was rather challenging. On the steepest 10 kilometers, we saw 2 local busses plus at least 15 trucks that had a breakdown.

Huế itself wasn't a very special city, apart from it's famous citadel. Therefore, let's mention a special dinner: we ordered an eleven course set-menu, which was a mixture between French "haute cuisine" and Vietnamese cooking. It was superbly decorated, as for example springrolls mounted on the trunk of a hollow pineapple with a candle burning inside or paté-rolls arranged as a peacock. Unfortunately, they didn't give us much time to enjoy each dish, as all 11 courses were served within just one hour - which wasn't the worst we had experienced. At one occasion, we were served 6 courses within only 10 minutes, but still, it came one after the other, as we were promised, when we were sceptically ordering. Spending all evening eating, is certainly no Asian habit. After learning the hard way, we started ordering only one course, eat it, order the next, eat it, order again, if we still could, and so on and on.

Laos: where people don't need much to be happy

As Hué was very near the Lao border, and the capital Hanoi, still a 15 hours overnigh-busride away, we started collecting information about transport and visa-requirements to Laos. There were many travelagents in town, catering for tourists and there were just as many answers about the visa requirements. At least, they all offered similar bus-connections and prices. Instead of feeling frustrated, we decided to be adventurous and find out, what it was all about, with these bribed "Honorary Consules", that apparently could do visa in 1 hour for a small "present", or the possibly new introduced visa, obtainable at the border. And we were lucky! Together with only 8 other tourists, we headed in a big bus towards the Lao-Bao border. We got 15 day's-visa stamped in our passports, with no problem or bribe, except, if it was secretly included in the busfare. At least, we were surprised that we didn't need to unload our luggage from the bus for checking and and we didn't need to carry it the one kilometer from one borderpost to another, as all the local people had to do, and we had seen the busdriver handing over some money to the customsclerk. The only annoyance there, were maybe 30 young women, eager to change our money; they all tried to squeeze into our bus before we tourists could leave it, and they also pressed us, when we were queuing at the customs-counter.

[Laos](#) started, and another 3 hours later, we arrived at our first destination, a place called [Savannakhet](#). On the way, we noticed the first differences to Vietnam: as more wooden- and bamboo-houses, often set-up on stilts, the ricefields here were dry and brown, there was far less motorised traffic, the people were of darker skin and they cared less about covering themselves up from the sun, neither with hats or facemasks, nor with long gloves. On that same evening, we already had discovered what the travellers before us meant, when they said, there was something very unique and attractive about Laos, but hardly could describe; it's friendly, unobtrusive people!



Wherever we went, people either left us in peace, or greeted us shyly, especially kids would often wave and give us a wonderful hearty smile. Here we weren't constantly being bothered to buy something and if somebody started a conversation with us, it was only to have a nice chat and would not turn into some "business subject". The mentality was so different, to the business-keen Vietnamese, that here in Laos, *WE* were bothering shop-keepers, or restaurant-waiters and owners in their peace, when ordering or buying something. We don't believe, this was due to communism, as the influence of the Party was only seldom visible, we felt it was rather leaning onto the Chinese example. However, with the mentality of the Lao-people, it was no surprise, that Indian, Vietnamese, Chinese, Thai- or Western Immigrants had been faster in setting up businesses. Although, the country is still way behind the others, it seemed more civilized than Vietnam, in respect of cleanliness, traffic-noise and order. They didn't live on the streets that much and pavements were used by pedestrians rather than motorbikes for parking.

Most probably, because Laos is so poor on one hand, but so easy-going for foreigners, it seems to be the darling of international aid-organisations. The WHO finances and maintains public rubbish-bins, waste collection was being organized and paid by the German government, some generous countries have aided in establishing water purification and a hydropower-plant on an artificial lake. We know now, that EU money doesn't only finance new roads in its own backward countries, but also in Laos, where they compete in help with the Thai- and Chinese government. They have realized, that if the two want to strengthen their trade, then they better build the connecting hiways themselves, otherwise, they might have to wait a few decades...

On a very crowded bus, taking up more than 100 people on and around it's 40 seats, we continued north for 9 hours.

As in Savannakhet, the 2nd largest city, also [Vientiane](#), the capital was rather an outspread village than a big city. There were no skyscratters and by walking just a bit out, we soon reached the fields and the little "suburbs", where people lived in wooden- and bamboo-houses.

Vientiane was full of ethnic restaurants and it was easier to find French or Indian food, rather than Lao-food.

With a bicycle, we went sight-seeing around town and along the Mekong river. We also visited some temples and the Lao-version of an "Arc de Triomphe". There were several local markets, but no big supermarkets. All those, who have a little money to spend, drove over the friendship-bridge to Thailand's shopping centres. Shop owners of the small businesses bought a lot of their supplies from there, tagging it with a Kip price. Some small shops were selling chocolates and biscuits from the Swiss supermarket-chain Migros, that also had come in via Thailand.



After a few days, we headed north to the the village of [Vang Vieng](#). We found a guesthouse on a superb setting, above the Nam Song river, with a romantic view over many scenic karst hills. The scenery resembled very much to what we had seen around Guilin, where we had been in China. We couldn't get enough of this wonderful landscape and walked or cycled in the surrounding, visiting some villages, where we felt very welcome. It was fascinating, to see what a simple, yet natural life people there led. They were so poor, but happy. Often, the villages did not have electricity, or only for a few hours every

night and usually there were only some water spots, where everybody gathered to shower and to wash. In general, they didn't get too fussy about exposing some nude skin, but the hips seemed to be their self-proclaimed tabu-zone - just to make washing a little bit complicated, they wore a sarong around their waist. Weaving could often be seen in the villages, where complicated patterns were worked in a traditional way to decorate the sarongs, the women's most worn garment. Vegetables were grown, and they raised some pigs and chicken, which they later on, sold on the markets. The display of all these exotic items, there, was a feast for our senses. We couldn't quite

understand, why everybody emptied their stall's garbage, which they had collected during the day, onto the road, once the market was closing. We felt sorry for the people who later had to collect it again in the dark. That was behind our 2.80 Euro guesthouse. In front below, there was an island in the river, where several small bar's offered drinks until late at night. During the day, they provided sunshades, mat's and hammocks to relax in the sun (or shade), all for free, which we took advantage of and enjoyed the peace totally undisturbed by any hawkers - they just didn't exist at all. Sometimes, we even had to order food from an outside restaurant, as the bar-owners were not motivated to cook on some days, and only served drinks. Maybe the lazyness of the waterbuffaloes soaking in the river, infected the locals as well.

The village of Vang Vieng has become very popular with Backpacker's, who, apart from enjoying the scenery of these steep limestone hills and their caves, love to go tubing on the river or just chill out. Only after 9 days, we continued by bus to [Luang Prabang](#), passing by Asian picture-book life with many tiny villages with bamboo and thatched roof houses. It was a 6 hours drive on a 275 km stretch with many curbs over a passroad. We could imagine, that also the scenery here would have been nice, but we couldn't see it at all! The local tradition of burning down the forest for land, has left the mountains naked and black and the air heavy and non-transparent. In the north, there was no day, when we hadn't seen ashes falling from the sky, that never was real blue and often by 4 o'clock, we couldn't see the sun anymore. Now in the dry season, smoke was often so heavy, that planes could not land in Luang Prabang, even though it was the most touristy place in Laos. A real touristmarket

was unfolding in the middle of a barred road every night, attracting also many package tourists.

By Tuk-tuk, we went out to a big waterfall. After a sweat-driving hike, we really deserved the dip in the cool water.

Another day, we chartered a long-boat on the Mekong-river, together with a German couple. Apart from the "tourist must", a cave that didn't impress us much, we visited several traditional villages along the river. It was again very charming to get in contact with the local tribes, which gave us a shy, but warm reception, so that we didn't feel like intruders. It was interesting to see, how different the simple communities were.



The country is very sparsely populated, but their numbers increase by 2.4% every year, which we believe - they have so many little children. But still, the 5.5 Mio. nation that consists of more than 50 tribes, has still plenty of space. The population-density is only 20 persons per square kilometer. By comparison, Vietnam suffers a density of 230 and Thailand of 120 persons/km². Apparently 85% of them live in rural areas. Medical care seems to be absolutely insufficient, with only a handful of badly equipped hospitals. People living out in the countryside often are too far away to have access in reasonable time. Often, we came accross people, who had disabilities, that probably could have healed with proper treatment. According to our guidebook, foreigners are routinely beeing transferred or flown out to Thailand, if they need more than a plaster, as every Thai provincial hospital is better equipped than the one in Vientiane.

Most families are very poor and only a few could afford a motorcycle. Many own only a bicycle, if they have a vehicle at all. But as the gap of poor and rich is much wider here than in Vietnam, we suddenly saw some big BMW's and Mercedes Benz's. As building constructors so far never had cars before, the houses didn't have a garage. However, most living-rooms of "new richman's places" were spacious enough and so the family wouldn't mind to accommodate any beloved status-symbol on wheels inside, between the sofa and cabinet, as doors usually were shop-like folding walls.

The local currency, the Kip, is very weak. If you had 80 Euros, you were a Millionaire. As they don't print high value banknotes, everybody carries around piles of money. Even on the vegetable market, it was a common sight, that the market-ladies piled their change on the vegetables and carried it around in baskets.

As bird-flu was under control for a few weeks now, we saw hens with cute little chicks everywhere. Egg and poultry were finally back on the menu, although, in the beginning we never got any tender meat. It was still being cooked "to death" for fear of contamination. Lao-food was a good mixture between Thai (only medium spicy, without too much coconut milk), French, Vietnamese and Chinese dishes, to which they served a distinctive sticky rice. Baguette was still widely available.

Lao people are very joyful and they like to party, sit together, sing and play the guitar everywhere - even on the back of a bicycle or truck. Seeing so many celebrations, we were surprised that they all finished by 11 p.m. One thing more, we were wondering about, were the immense number of impressive buddhist temples. Most of them were even getting extensions right now. Is it as in most countries of the world: the less money people have, the more they donate to their religious leaders, probably hoping they can do miracles for them ?

Thailand's beaches part 2: back to civilisation!

After a good three weeks in Laos, we bought an airpass, which brought us on its first leg to [Thailand](#)'s capital [Bangkok](#).

What a difference! More tall buildings in one suburb, than we had seen in 7 weeks in Indochina. Trafficjams as ever...when did Thailand start to have so many cars and highways to fill them at once?

As most backpackers, we stayed at the famous [Khao San road](#). Even though, some had told us, that the off-season had started, there was an amazing large number of tourists around. Especially in the evenings and on weekends, an even larger number of locals blended in that fun-fair, to see and to be seen, as the Thais were

parading just as well, with extravagant hair-fashion, funky cloths or tatoos. With surprise, we saw that you can buy "Bob Marley style dreadlocks" in the street, having them braided into your hair in just a couple of hours. Until then, we naively had thought, that they all were real.

On the entire Khao San, road work was under way, to transform it into a pedestrian area, making it certainly much safer for the strolling crowd, who concentrates anyway rather on the layouts of shops, restaurants and other people, than on traffic.

As for many, Bangkok is the gateway coming from anywhere in

the world and going to anywhere in the world, at any time of day, many businesses stay open 24 hours. Today, there are not only budget hotels and eateries in this area, but also pricier ones, which are mainly frequented by locals.

Of course, we ventured out to have a look at the city and surprisingly, we found a much cleaner, pedestrian-friendly and more quiet city, than what we remembered from 12 years ago. The city has big modern shoppingcentres. Skytrains and elevated tollways are means of fast transport above the trafficjams and a new subway system is just before opening. At the same time, we came along temporary streetmarkets, foodstalls and a flower market, set-up in the old traditional way along the pavement, but they left always enough space for pedestrians.

Although it was quite hot, the canals called "Klongs" did not look and smell anymore like floating garbage dumps, as they used to do. Only the stinky [Tuk-Tuk](#) taxi, remained still as an ineradicable nostalgic relict.

On March 25th, we continued by plane to Samui, from where we took a ferry to [Koh Pha Ngan](#). On Had Yao Beach, we met up with Angelika and Karsten, whom we know from Costa Natura. They had travelled around South-East Asia for the last two months, carrying only 3.9 kg of luggage in total.

As Naturists, they were tired of wearing swimming-gear all the time, so they had arranged for two secluded bungalows, when exploring the island with a rented Jeep, 2 days ago. So, the next day, the four of us went to the other side of the island, where we moved into an originally decorated cottage, integrating the rocks it was standing on, right above the sea. Except from our neighbouring bungalow, which was Angelika & Karsten's, nobody could see onto our terrace. However, later on we discovered through the leaves, that we weren't the only ones, enjoying the terrace in the nude... This secluded hideaway, wasn't connected to electric wiring yet and there was light over a petrol-generator only for a few hours at night. There were some six restaurants offering basic, but very good food. The two best ones were situated on terraces over the highest rocks, so it needed a steep climb up to reach them. Especially Karsten and Heinz lost quite a few litres of sweat, by going up all these steps so many times. We had great fun together, sharing traveller's tales and secretly doing, what we shouldn't do, in this part of the world.....



After saying farewell to Angelika & Karsten, we went to stay at Haadrin once again. Not really because it is the nicest place we know on [Koh Pha Ngan](#), but because it's the most convenient. Now we appreciated again to have electricity and fast, reliable internet access around the clock. Also, the bigger choice of restaurants was nicer, especially since seafood here was either fresh or stored deepfrozen, not half frozen and therefore healthier.

On April 13th, Thailand celebrated the start of the Buddhist New Year 2547 with the [Songkran Festival](#), or as the Tourists call it: the water-splashing festival. On this and the following days, young and old enjoy throwing water at each other. Nobody was spared, whole crowds stood by the roadside, armed with sophisticated water pistols, cannons, hoses, spray guns, as well as plain old buckets. Pickup-trucks, loaded with people and the obligatory munitions of big water tanks, often chilled with ice, made the rounds, squirting and spraying on sight.

Foot soldiers carried plastic backpacks, filled with water with a spray-gun attached, or maybe a pot of white or colored paste, made from harmless talcum powder, to smear the passersby. To get wet, was rather refreshing, because in the meantime, it was the peak of the Thai summer and temperatures had soared up to 40 degrees. It was a humid heat, much hotter than we had experienced it before and people assured us, it was a bit higher than usual. Day and night, Heinz - and now more often also Brigitte, was bathed in sweat. Not even bathing in the sea was refreshing anymore, since the water temperature on the shallow beaches, was meanwhile above 30°C.

We wanted to get out of this heat! For the continuation of our trip we were initially considering going first via Burma to China, then to various Pacific Islands and finally ending up in Canada in about one years time...

With every new idea, we ran back to the air conditioned cybercafé, checking out flight possibilities and climate charts on the internet. Big jolt, we found out, that our Asian favorites would still become hotter (Rangoon and Shanghai at 40 degrees would not be fun) and the Pacific wetter and windier (what is there to do in the hurricane season ?). But what cheered us up, despite all these disappointing results, were the cheap flights, that were available from Bangkok to Canada. Suddenly, we figured "why not doing this trip vice-versa?" That way, we would get away from the sizzling heat immediately, probably freezing onto the first iceberg we would come across - but with the possibility to be in the buff, in case we could stand it ...

Quite spontaneously, we booked a flight to Vancouver, that cost just Euro 380./each. This way, by the time we leave Canada in autumn, it will be the perfect season to tour the Micronesian Islands in the North Pacific. If we then spend a couple of months either in Asia or Down Under, also in the best time, it will be just perfect to see Melanesian and Polynesian Islands in the South Pacific. Any altering of these big plans will be mentioned on our Webpage's News site...

Wishing to spend the remaining time in Thailand on another place, we traveled by boat and bus down to Krabi, and from there to [Koh Lanta](#). What a difference! It's in the Muslim area of the country and many people dress accordingly, but we were still 400 km north of where they killed each other for their faith. It seemed, they didn't learn a lesson from what is going on in Northern Ireland or anywhere else in the world. How can we blame



them ? Almost everywhere we went in the last few years, we've seen ordinary play-grounds with "old fashioned toys" as swings and slides deserted. But 5 to 10 years old kids could all be found in game rooms, excitingly sitting in front of large screens, shooting fanatically with electronic guns at the enemy on the computer: human or monster. To them it's an exciting game and they see little difference if a few years later, some fundamentalist leader tries to motivate them to kill others and themselves, in order to fight for their faith.

The main road through the island of Lanta was never in the same good condition, as the roads on the mainland. Here it was quite lonely, not many Tourists left, in contrary to where we had been. About 80% of the resorts were now closed for a few months, because the rainy-season was just about to start. Around Krabi and Phuket, the guests mainly come for a short vacation only, often on packages during the big school-holidays, and that's not now.

Thanks to this, those resorts that remain open, try to lure customers in with rock-bottom prices. We stayed in a nice resort with a pool besides the beach and we got a wonderful bungalow, that was nicely decorated and really had space for 4 people. It had *AIRCON* (heavenly), fridge, TV and hot shower for 400 Baht/8 Euro a night. Around X-Mas, guests pay over ten times more! You can imagine, how wonderfully we slept ?

As exotic and different the life of Asian people appears, compared to our western style, we realized that in fact, the differences are not quite that big, if you search for the reason why they do live like that. Somehow, it's frustrating to realize that - as in the West - most Asians are more concerned about what other people think of them, than what they really would like to do. In order to keep face (the ever important thing here) and to gain respect, they suppress their own wishes and don't question anything but bleat with the flock to remain conform. Only very few perky young folks (often new rich) break out and do almost anything, to be different and to make the eyebrows of the elders raise. Everything, everywhere in the world, is just the same, almost as they always say in Thailand : "same same, but different".

Unfortunately, some more appreciated differences between East and the West, seem to evade. During our stay, more and more often we got fruit-juices served, made from re-constituted concentrate, instead of freshly

squeezed fruit and on the other hand, for ice-coffee, they suddenly started to use fresh milk, instead of the thick condensed milk, which made the coffee watery.

After a week on Koh Lanta, we went on to [Krabi](#) which is famous for it's scenery with rocky cliffs and karsts formations, raising from the sea and countryside. Krabi town surprised us with a rather big and busy center, considering it has only 25'000 inhabitants. We stayed nearby at the tourist village of [Ao Nang](#), which was quite similar to the package tour destination of Phuket. There are various 3, 4 or 5 star resorts and they were presently filled with mainly Asian tourists from the upper class. Posh VIP luxury busses brought them in and on the weekends, they were joined by wealthy Thai people, arriving from the surroundings in their big expensive cars. We got to talk to some of the holiday-makers from Bangkok , Malaysia and China , who were well educated and fluent in English, some of them had even studied in Australia . To travel is for them just as exciting as it is to us and some had even quit their jobs, to do this. With the boom of Asias economy, and especially Chinas , the future of the tourism industry is secured. If only 1% of the Chinese population can afford to go traveling abroad, that would be 12,5 Mio. Tourists, if we calculate correctly - but this number is likely to go up to 20% or so, during the next 10 years. Believing the many stories we heard from other Western travelers, who had visited China recently, it seems that many of the Chinese cities nowadays look much more modern and advanced than western cities. That's also why we would like to go back to China and see it for ourselves. But as we said before; not when it's 40°C hot - and so we first wanted to go via Bangkok, to cool but "backward" Canada !



Brigitte & Heinz



more pictures on our Homepage

