

Southeast Asia Journal
July 30 – August 15, 2009
Tom Butt

Good Morning Vietnam Day 1

Shirley and I are taking advantage of the City Council August hiatus to make a trip I have wanted to do for many years, revisiting southeast Asia (Vietnam, Cambodia and Thailand) for the first time in 40 years. I intend to try and provide a running account of this trip interspersed with accounts of my government-sponsored first trip 40 years ago this year when I was a 25-year-old second lieutenant in the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers.

After my parents died, I found all of the letters I had written home that they had saved, and those and many old photographs formed the basis of a narrative I wrote many years later that I called "[Letters Home](http://www.tombutt.com/pdf/letters%20home.pdf)." (Click on the link <http://www.tombutt.com/pdf/letters%20home.pdf> for the entire narrative).

For the most part, I enjoyed my military tour in Vietnam. As an Army engineer officer, my job was mainly managing the construction of infrastructure (roads, bridges and buildings), some of which are still there. I was fortunate to land a military assignment that was equivalent to working in the top management of a major construction company employing over 9,000 people. I got to see a lot of a beautiful country, meet a lot of people and learn a lot of skills that I still use in my work today. We worked very hard and accomplished a lot, but we also played very hard and tried to make the most of a year-long involuntary vacation.

I was also fortunate to have an opportunity at the end of my tour to visit Cambodia and Angkor Wat in the spring of 1970, virtually untouched by the war at that time but barely a month before the U.S. invasion set into motion a series of political events that several years later turned into one of the world's most horrendous genocides.

From Cambodia, I went on to visit Thailand, Hong Kong and Japan. I sailed to Russia and took the Trans-Siberian Railroad to Moscow and then toured Europe before finally coming home to Arkansas and later California.

On March 25, 1969, I landed at Cam Ranh Bay from Seattle, WA via Tokyo. This time, in 2009, we fly to Ho Chi Minh City (Saigon) via Tokyo. Following is what I wrote about my 1969 arrival:



159th Engineer group Area of Operations 1969 (cross-hatched)



Tom Butt and Allen Tolbert at Saigon City Hall, 1969



Tom and Shirley Butt at Saigon People's Committee Hall (City



Hall), 2009
Continental (Palace) Hotel in 2009



Rooftop restaurant, Rex Hotel
2009



Entrance to industrial park at
former location of Long Binh



USARV buildings used for
Vietnam Army compound 2009



Location of 159 Engineer Group
compound at Long Binh is now
an industrial facility for the CP
Group

Good Morning Vietnam Day 4

It is now August 4, and this is the first time that I have had time to write anything down. The last few days have been a whirlwind, trying to cram everything into a trip that is clearly too short.

We are now in Dalat but return to Saigon via air late this afternoon.

Stepping back a few days, my friend Phuc and her nephew who was getting married here picked us up at the Tan Son Nhat about midnight Thursday (we lost a day crossing the date line), and we checked into a hotel next to a new house she built in the Binh Tan District of (southwest) Saigon (Ho Chi Minh City).

Gone is the old French-built terminal that I remember from 40 years ago. Tan Son Nhat now has a modern new international terminal that could be anywhere. There is no more "welcome to Vietnam" rush of hot humid air. Everything is air conditioned.

People take Swine Flu very seriously here. Every airport employee wears a surgical mask. In fact, I found out later that they electronically scan every incoming passenger for elevated temperature (indicating a possibility of fever), and one of individuals in the wedding party who had the misfortune to be too hot was detained in a hospital for two days until tests indicated an absence of Swine Flu.

Friday, we headed downtown to see how once familiar places had changed. The first thing you notice is the traffic. Forty years ago, traffic was already legendary, but it was nothing like today. Where once bicycles ruled, an endless sea of motorcycles, motor scooters and motor bikes prevail. There are some taxis, buses and trucks, but Saigon predominantly moves on two wheels that carry families of four, cargos of hundreds of pounds, construction materials, you name it.

The traffic flows organically, like a river, seemingly with no rules of the road, few traffic lights and no traffic cops. If you want to make a left turn, you just do it in the face of a thousand oncoming vehicles. They part and weave almost magically with no one slowing or stopping. About half the people driving motorcycles, and probably 2/3 of the women wear surgical masks to protect against air pollution. These masks are available in every imaginable designer color and pattern. Everyone, by law, has to wear a helmet.

Similarly, pedestrians just wade into the stream, and the traffic just flows all around. Everyone seems to be protected by an invisible shield that keeps them safe. I saw only two very minor accidents where someone's motor scooter had gone down with no damage and no injuries.

Saigon has more than doubled in population in 40 years, from about 3 million to over 6 million. What hasn't changed is the basic urban pattern, perhaps the ultimate mixed-use new urbanism with every building street frontage a business of some kind, more often than not spilling out onto the sidewalk and sometimes into the street itself, with at least four stories of residential above.

The taxi to downtown took about an hour, and we were dropped off at the Hotel Continental that as much as anything marks the heart of old Saigon, one of the old French hotels and once the hangout of Graham Green. Although high rise hotels have been planted all



Saigon Street 1969



Saigon street 2009



Shirley and Phuc 2009



City Hall from Rex Hotel rooftop 2009



Sidewalk cobblers 2009

over downtown, the main streets and landmarks were like old friends with a fresh coat of paint. We took in the Notre Dame Cathedral, the Old Post Office and the City Hall (now Office of the People's Committee of Ho Chi Minh City). We had lunch on the rooftop of the Rex Hotel, once an American military billet with a famous rooftop bar that has changed little. I used to hang out there and used the same rooftop swimming pool that is still there. We spent a good part of the afternoon walking the entire length of a street named Yen Do in 1970 but now Ly Chinh Thang looking for the apartment several us rented where Al Tolbert lived and the rest of us use as a base. It could not be found – probably torn down for a new building.

Before going back to our hotel, we stopped at the Reunification Palace, formerly the seat of the South Vietnamese government and the home of South Vietnam's last real president, Nguyen Van Thieu. There wasn't much to see there, although it was supposedly furnished the way it was in 1975 when Saigon fell, and the formal spaces are used from time to time for government events. The basement was still full of American made radio equipment, and the "War Room" with tactical maps was intact. On the grounds were the two tanks that broke the gates down in 1975.

Other than being even more bustling and cleaned up, Saigon at the street level is much the same place, although 40 years ago and a year after Tet 1968, there was barbed wire and concertina everywhere, sandbagged checkpoints at every corner and official building and armed military personnel and police everywhere. The streets were swarming with military vehicles and uniformed military from South Vietnam, Australia, Thailand, Korea and the U.S. Last time I was here, I had a loaded .45 on my waist, and we had to check our weapons in at the Rex Hotel lobby before heading for the rooftop bar. The entrance to the Rex was sandbagged and ready for an attack. All gone today and replaced by attractive hostesses.

We headed back for dinner with the family and to catch upon sleep.

The next morning, Saturday, we rented a car and driver primarily to go out to what was once Long Binh where I lived and worked. I knew there was almost nothing left from reading accounts by others, but I had to make the trip.

A trip that once took less than 30 minutes from downtown Saigon was over an hour on a new four lane toll road with traffic that makes I-880 look like fun. What was once open countryside is now filled in solid with industry, new residential development and even a Disneyland-like theme park. Using maps and the GPS on my I-phone, I was able to almost pinpoint to location of the former compound of the HHC 159th Engineer Group. It is now some livestock product-related industrial compound owned by the C-P Group, one of Asia's largest companies. Ironically, I met the president of the C-P Group in Arkansas several years ago, and we will be guests at his home on August 11 in Bangkok.

Most of what was the headquarters for the U.S. military in Vietnam and the home of about 75,000 soldiers in an area almost as large as Richmond is now an industrial and business park. When I was here 40 years ago, I don't think there was a tree in sight, but the jungle has returned with a vengeance. Trees and grass are everywhere. The only thing left is the cluster of buildings on a hilltop that once housed the headquarters of the United States Army Vietnam (USARV). It and the area around it have been taken



Sidewalk peddler 1969



U.S. Army Engineer bulldozer on display at War Remnants Museum 2009



Wedding 2009



Picking up barbecue, Phuc and Shirley

over by the Vietnam military and are mostly inaccessible, although driving up to the gate we could see some military training facilities such as firing ranges. What was most interesting is that most of it seems to have been turned over to agriculture with uniformed soldiers doing the farm work. A herd of cows crossed the road right down the hill from the gate.

I spent some time in one of the USARV buildings in early 1970 when I was assigned to the board of a general courts martial for two trials, and we often used a helipad adjacent to the buildings when making inspection tours out into the countryside. Long gone are the perimeter protective berms, rows of defensive wire and the 175 mm guns, although one of them is on display at the war museum in Saigon.

Heading back into Saigon, we had the driver wait for us at the 100-year old Jade Emperor Pagoda before dropping us off again at the Continental. An interesting feature at the Pagoda is its famous turtle sanctuary.

I had to get some visa photos made for future border crossings, then we walked over to the Binh Than Market, a Saigon landmark since the early 20th Century. It's a giant public market in the heart of Saigon adjacent to a huge traffic circle where you can find almost anything. It looks the same as it did 40 years ago, except then the interior of the traffic circle was also packed with market stalls. Now it is immaculately landscaped.

We had lunch at one of the hundreds of food stands and had just enough time left to walk over to the War Remnants Museum (formerly War Crimes Museum) located in the former USIA building. I think this museum has been toned down some over the years to make it more palatable for tourists, but is still a pretty sobering place. It is pretty well designed for a museum. It tells the story of the Vietnamese quest for independence from the Vietnamese perspective and treats neither the French nor the Americans with sympathy.

Despite the war, everyone here could not be friendlier. Anybody serving the public speaks "get along" English, and I am enjoying using my modest Vietnamese when I need to.

If you are not familiar with recent Vietnamese history, the key points are that independence was declared after the occupying Japanese were defeated in 1945, Ho Chi Minh wanted to form a republic with a constitution based on the U.S. Constitution and asked for U.S. assistance. Instead, obsessed by fear of communism, the U.S. helped return France to run Indochina as a colony and largely financed the French war until the French defeat at Dien Bien Phu. Spurned by the U.S., Ho Chi Minh successfully sought assistance from Russia and China.

The UN called for a national election in 1954, but the U.S. backed a partition of the country and set up Diem as president in the South. As pressure against the South Vietnamese government increased from the North, the U.S. stepped in to protect its anti-communist investment, and the rest is history.

The big wedding was Saturday night. Phuc and the women of her family spent the day getting ready with a house call manicurist and beauty parlor. The actual wedding ceremony was a small family event early in the morning, so what we went to was really a



Phuc's ancestral home in Rach Kien



Ready for lunch, Phuc's brother, Phuc Tom and Shirley



Going to market on two wheels



Pond in back of Phuc's Rach Kien home

reception. It was held in a conference center called the “White Palace,” (yes, in English), a huge modern building near Tan Son Nhat, along with several other wedding receptions. By my count, there were around 600 guests seated at between 30 and 40 tables, each seating 16 persons. I’ve never been to a wedding event so big and so professionally choreographed.

The bride and groom both live in California, but apparently the bride’s mother considered it important to hold the event in Vietnam. Dozens (or maybe hundreds) of friends and family flew in from the U.S. Phuc’s two daughters and their families from California were there as well as her two brothers (one being the father of the groom) and one sister. The event included dinner and professional entertainers, toasts, visits to each table by the bride and the groom, and professional video clips of the bride and groom posed in various romantic backdrops. Other than one other person, we were the only westerners there.

Sunday turned out to be a special treat. Phuc hosted about 40 people, including family, friends and the bride and groom at her ancestral home in a rural village, Rach Kien, about a 30-minute drive southwest of Saigon. I had visited there 40 years ago when her parents were still alive and living there. The house, extremely modest by American standards, was built by her grandfather, a district chief, 100 years ago. When I was last there, it was surrounded by farmland, but now the village is encroaching. A nephew’s family lives there now.

Rach Kien is a poor place, and when we arrived there were maybe a hundred people gathered quietly in the front yard. Phuc had arranged to have 100 large bags of rice brought to the house, paid for by her and her daughters. They were stacked in the living room and handed out to each of the gathered villagers. When those were gone, the family handed out a stack of paper money about two inches thick until it was gone.

The house is one story with a rooftop deck over a more recent addition in the back. Everything is open to the air with no glass windows, but there are shutters. The original house had one large room and two bedrooms. The addition, separated by a small courtyard, has two more bedrooms, a kitchen and bathroom.

All the water comes from rainwater stored in a cistern. There were several small dogs and chickens in the yard, which was lush and informally landscaped with native shrubs and trees. Out back was a pond that meandered through the immediate neighborhood. While we were waiting for lunch, coconuts were harvested from a palm in the yard and the milk served.

Lunch, prepared both in the courtyard and the kitchen, was a real banquet, which included barbecued duck and pork bought at a roadside stand on the way down, a curry with chicken and yams, rice and noodles, salad and a dozen different kinds of fruit. Fruit is just amazing here, with such exotics as Durians, Mangosteens, Pomelos, Rambutans as well as bananas and dozens of others available everywhere.

I want to tell you a little about Phuc. Her father was a school teacher in Rach Kien. She was born in 1948 and married at age 18, moving from Rach Kien to Saigon. Coming from a middle class family, her mother sent a maid with her. She had never worked, inside or outside the home.



Tom and Shirley at wedding



Display at war Remnants Museum



Running cattle at former Long Binh Post



Guard gate to military installation at former USARV compound at Long Binh



Ben Than market, Saigon

By 1968, she had two daughters, and her husband disappeared somehow in the fog of war. For the first time, she had to support herself, and her natural bent as an entrepreneur emerged. She opened modest restaurants and bars in a couple of locations south of Saigon where the 9th Infantry Division was then operating, catering primarily to American soldiers. When I met her in 1969, she was moving around between her shops constantly, leaving her daughters with her parents as necessary. By then, the parents had also moved into Saigon. Rach Kien was not always a safe place to be.

In the early 1970s, she married again, this time to a lieutenant colonel in the South Vietnamese Army. They had a son shortly before the fall of Saigon in 1975, and her husband was shipped to Hanoi for twelve years of "reeducation." She visited him twice, traveling to Hanoi by train.

Under the new regime, times were hard. The communists cut off her father's pension, and she was constantly watched and made to perform menial labor by the conquerors. She had no viable means of supporting herself and her family. Her father was sick, and I managed to obtain special medication from a local doctor and have it sent to Vietnam for his use. By 1980, she had had enough and paid a contractor in gold to take her to Indonesia by boat, but he took the money and disappeared. (In an unlikely sequel, she tracked him down in Los Angeles years later and successfully sued him to return the money to her).

On the second try, she was more successful, and she and her 4-year old son became "boat people," ending up after a life-threatening voyage in an Indonesian refugee camp for nearly a year. In 1981, she wrote to us, asking us to sponsor her to come to the U.S., which we agreed to. She had friends in the growing Vietnamese community in San Jose and wanted to go there but got sent to North Carolina instead. We sent her plane tickets and picked her up in San Francisco in 1981.

Phuc had only a suitcase of clothes with her and no money, but her entrepreneurial skills kicked in, and she plunged back into the restaurant business, first with the type of food coaches you see at construction sites and later with restaurants. She has been very successful, and in fact, one of her restaurants, Pho Saigon, is in the Pacific East Mall in Richmond.

In the 1980s, Phuc's parents died, and her daughters emigrated to California, where they are now married with families as is her son.

Phuc has used a lot of the proceeds from her economic success to help people in Vietnam who are still struggling.

That's it for now. The sun is out in Dalat, and we have to fly back to Saigon this afternoon. More about Dalat later.



Inside Ben Thanh Market



Ben Thanh Market



Dragonfruit at Ben Thanh



Lunch at Ben Thanh Market



Baskets



Display of American military units in War Remnants Museum (pointing at 20th Engineer Brigade)



Streets of Saigon 2009



Phuc with daughter, son-in-law and Shirley



Photos of Phuc's parents at ancestral



Kids waiting for lunch at Rach Kien



I bought some lottery tickets from this guy in Rach Kien

Now in Can Tho

Today is Wednesday, August 5, and we are in Can Tho in a hotel next to the Mekong River. This computer doesn't have a USB port, so I still can't send any photos.

Backing up to August 2, we flew out of Tan Son Nhat in Saigon to Dalat, a quick 50-minute flight, arriving late Sunday Afternoon.

I always wanted to go to Dalat. Back in the day, Dalat was synonymous with Shangri La. When I was here in the Army, I wanted to see everything, and I never missed a chance to hitch a ride somewhere or look for an excuse to go inspect something somewhere. Unfortunately, there was no military business in Dalat, and I never got to go there.

Dalat is up in the southern part of the Central Highlands, established by the French in the 19th Century as a resort to cool off from the Saigon heat. As far as I know, both the French and American wars passed it by. Today it has a special attraction for lovers and honeymooners.

It sort of reminds me of Eureka Springs, Arkansas, a 19th Century resort town up in the Arkansas Ozarks with hills and pine trees. Dalat is full of kitsch, such as the Valley of Love and Lake of Sighs, both replete with hundreds of photo op backdrops for the romantically inclined. It's so bad that it's good.

On an overcast and rainy Monday, we booked a tour of the local attractions. We were the only non-Vietnamese on our small tour bus, and we visited a Buddhist monastery, a Buddhist pagoda, a Catholic monastery, Bao Dai's Summer Palace, a waterfall-based amusement park where we rode an elephant, the Valley of Love and a cluster of shops for local art, especially silk embroidery.



Bao Dai's Summer Palace, Dalat



Riding the elephant in Dalat

[Bao Dai](#) was the last Vietnamese royalty who, according to the exhibits, was a figurehead during the French period who spent most of his time hunting and womanizing. After 1954, the palace was used as a summer retreat by Diem.

Eureka Springs has its giant Christ of the Ozarks and Dalat has its giant Buddha, both on mountaintops. I'm glad we went so I could finally check it off my list after 40 years, but I'm not sure I would add it to the A-ticket.

Monday night, it all caught up with us, and we slept 12 hours. I spent a lot of Tuesday morning composing my last email on a slow computer, and we walked around town and had some lunch before catching a shuttle bus the small airport, some 30 kilometers down the mountain.

The only non-Vietnamese we saw in Dalat were a few Australians and French that we could identify by language and some other westerners we couldn't.

Coming back in to Tan Son Nhat in the daylight, I noted that the only vestige of the war were rows of steel and concrete vaulted structures, similar to Quonset huts, once used to protect helicopters from rockets. Some were still being used for helicopter hangers, but most were empty or used for storage. Luckily, our bodies were sufficiently cool to pass the fever scan.

Arriving back in Saigon about dark, we checked into the [Hotel Continental](#), called the Continental Palace when I was last in Saigon. Graham Green had Room 210 a few years ago, and we had Room 237. The weather was as good as it gets, clear and warm with a slight breeze. Contrary to popular opinion, Saigon has some really nice weather. We ate in a place we found in Frommers, but it was too spiffy and overpriced for my taste. I'll have to let Frommer's know. We hit the rooftop bar at the Caravelle, but it was cramped and the music too loud. I prefer the Rex.

This morning, we were picked up at 8:00 AM to begin our delta tour. I really didn't know what to expect, but it turned out that it was just a tour guide, a driver and us.

On the way south, we passed through Saigon South, which is a whole different world. Think Pleasanton or San Ramon, only bigger and better. More cars and fewer motorcycles. Everything is new and expensive, and it goes on for miles. This is where the new money is. Condos go for several hundred thousand dollars. Auto Row features dealerships for every make of car, including BMW and Mercedes, bigger and grander than anything even in the Bay Area. Unfortunately, the planners have spread everything out like the worst American planning, losing an opportunity to preserve the historically intimate streetscape of Vietnam and European cities.

We drove south on Highway 1 to [Vinh Long](#), where we transferred to a boat on a branch of the Mekong. Forty years ago, what is now Highway 1 was a narrow two-lane bad road surrounded by agricultural fields and small villages. Now it is a continuous strip of industry, roadside stands and new development.

Our guide is about 30 years old, originally from Danang but now living in Saigon. His family were Viet Minh sympathizers during the French war, and when Diem came to power after the partition, the government had his uncle killed, despite a UN resolution that there was to be no political retribution. His father was killed in the American war by a mine when his Red Cross Vehicle was blown up.

Like other Vietnamese, he recalls the total disaster of the Communists' first



Valley of Love, Dalat



Dalat market



Saigon South on the way to the Delta



Vinh Trang Buddhist pagoda (built in 1849)

15 years of ruling the southern part of Vietnam. They tried to institute classical socialism with collective farms and real estate appropriation, but it failed miserably. New leadership scrapped all that about 1989, and Vietnamese capitalism flourished with a vengeance Today, the country has one of the world's hottest economies.

He is Catholic, as are many Vietnamese. In Dalat, 60 percent of the population is Catholic, a very high proportion.

The delta tour really got exciting when we boarded a boat and began to thread our way through the Mekong River waterways, ranging from the mile-wide main channels to narrow winding branches reminiscent of Louisiana bayous. This is the fictional setting of Apocalypse Now, and it looked the part.

Although these waterways are still essential for commerce and transportation, we passed hundreds of tour boats like ours, many of them much larger. Touring the delta via water is clearly very popular. Most of the westerners we ran into were Australians or Europeans. There were very few Americans.

We stopped at a candy factory, a fruit tree nursery and a restaurant for lunch, all accessible mainly by water.

We are now in our hotel in Can Tho with an early morning wakeup to get the local floating market while it is most active.



This little pig went to market



Cai rang Floating market in Vinh Long



Left and below, the new "Saigon South"



Goodbye Vietnam Day 8

I guess I am lucky to have Internet access at every hotel, but dealing with emails is not easy. That's why I started attaching these MSWORD files.

We are in the Mekong Delta border town of Chau Doc, and we leave early tomorrow morning by boat, traveling up the Mekong to Phnom Penh, Cambodia.

When I was in Vietnam 40 years ago, I never visited the Delta, but the waterways triggered a lot of memories about bridges I'll explain later.

Driving from Can Tho to Chau Doc is not unlike taking Highway 4 through the Sacramento River Delta. Water, islands and canals are everywhere. Until recently, there were no bridges over the Mekong, so ferries are big business, and the vendors who service long lines of traffic are also big business. But that is all coming to an end. One large cable stayed bridge has been completed and another one will open soon, putting thousands of roadside vendors out of business. In fact, the government is building new limited access expressways parallel to Highway 1 that will change Delta travel forever.

The Mekong River Delta is not only the rice and fish basket of Vietnam but also a major exporter to other Asian countries. Like other parts of Vietnam, the economy seems to be booming, with new construction everywhere.

We got up early this morning to catch the morning floating market of Cai Rang where wholesale growers from all over the Delta converge to transfer fruit and vegetables to retailers, all via boat.

Leaving Can Tho, we split off Highway 1 onto Highway 91, heading west toward Chau Doc. The agriculture turns from fruits and vegetables to rice. As we headed west, we found the road shoulders and front yards being used for drying the recent rice crop. People work it with hoes or just walk through it to keep the rice stirred up for drying. Usually it was on tarps, but often it was on bare asphalt or concrete. Once the rice is sufficiently dry, it is bagged and sent to plants where the husks are removed, and it is polished.

The husks become a major source of fuel and are used to heat kilns where hollow clay tile are manufactured. Hollow clay tile is the major building material in Vietnam and is typically laid up to form walls that are later covered with cement plaster within a spindly concrete frame. If they ever had an earthquake here, there would be nothing left. This is similar to the original construction of the Richmond Plunge that has been removed to increase earthquake safety.

In addition to the smoke from the brick kilns, rice straw is burned in the fields, creating a smoky haze not unlike the smoke from the fires we experienced last summer in California.

We had a delicious lunch at a storefront restaurant in Chau Doc and headed for Nui Sam (Sam Mountain) to walk it off. This mountain pops up unexpectedly from the dead flat Delta kind of like Mt. Diablo. Because of its unusual topography, it is considered a holy place, and its slopes are covered with shrines, grottos, pagodas and ancient tombs. It was a 700 meter climb but well worth it.

After Nui Sam, we were back on the water visiting a huge houseboat community on the Mekong devoted to fish farming. Each large houseboat is also a floating fish farm where fish are fed pellets of food made from fish scraps, rice powder and water morning glories. These folks are ethnic Vietnamese who had settled in Cambodia but were driven out by the Pol Pot



Waterway near Can Tho



Lunch stop on an island



Ubiquitous rest stop along Highway 1



Drying rice in the road



Crossing the Mekong at Can Tho

Regime.

Nearby, we visited another community resulting from ethnic relocation, the Chams who are Muslims and came originally from Central Vietnam. They live along the river in stilted houses kind of like the town of Locke in the Sacramento River Delta. They are totally different in appearance from the ethnic Vietnamese and wear head gear like Muslims in other parts of the world. Instead of churches or Pagodas, the village has mosques.

Several of the old bridges we passed under by boat were being replaced by new concrete bridges. The old ones were probably vestiges of the Vietnam War and built by American Army engineers because they were Bailey (or panel) bridges, made from interlocking truss sections used to assemble military bridges. What was long gone were the pier protection assemblies that protected every bridge from sappers, made from steel framework and barbed wire. During the war, every bridge has guard bunkers at either end, some left over from the French war, and pier protection standoffs. The guards were always ARVN soldiers who caught whatever fish they need for dinner by tossing a hand grenade into the water and scooping up the stunned fish. Each bridge also had a large flock of geese who were supposed to sound the alarm if a Viet Cong Sapper was trying to sneak up to blow the bridge. Obviously, it didn't always work because a lot of bridges were blown up.

With the huge amount of construction going on in the Delta, I was taken by the piles of crushed rock I saw everywhere. There is no indigenous source of rock in the Delta, and at one time, the 159th Engineer Group operated the only quarries, crushers and asphalt plants in the southern part of Vietnam. All of the rock was allocated to Army construction missions, mostly road building. My shop controlled disposition of this rock, and we had a constant stream of military personnel begging us for rock for some project that had not made the official cut. Most of them, including Koreans, ARVN and Australians, we turned down, but every now and then we cut someone some slack. Rock could be traded for steaks, shrimp, beer and air conditioners, and the Army runs on barter. I gave an old classmate, Larry Townley from Arkansas some as well as my cousin, an officer in a 9th Infantry Division Aviation company. Remember Yossarian in Catch-22?

Time to go to dinner. See you in Cambodia.



Cham Village



Breakfast at the Hotel Victoria on the Mekong in Chau Doc



Mekong River in Cambodia

Into the Heart of Darkness

Actually, the boat trip up the Mekong was uneventful. I kept looking for remnants of that bridge from Apocalypse Now, but there wasn't much to see from the middle of a mile-wide river, red with the mud of the half dozen countries it passes through. In the hour we were still in Vietnam, the banks were mainly vegetable and rice farms.

In Cambodia, you see more trees and cattle. Crossing the border, we stopped at both a Vietnam exit station (a houseboat) and the Cambodia entry station. Although there is nothing to it, just the concept of entering Cambodia is exciting. While waiting to get our passports stamped, we talked to French couple about our age and found that the man was actually born in Hanoi. His father had been a lawyer in the old French Indochina, leaving Hanoi for Phnom Penh when the country was partitioned in 1954. In 1975, he was the last Frenchman to leave Phnom Penh, barely escaping the Khymer Rouge. This was their third visit back to southeast Asia.

The boat trip was from 8:00 AM until 2:30 PM, at least 1 1/2 hours more than scheduled. There are no taxis in Phnom Penh, so we took a tuk-tuk to the Raffles Hotel Royal. A tuk-tuk is a gussied up trailer with seats and a canopy pulled by a motorcycle and is the main transportation for visitors in Cambodia. The Raffles is the most expensive hotel we are staying in, but I chose it for nostalgia. I stayed there in March 1970 for about three days. Then, it was Phnom Penh's best hotel but was in genteel deterioration and cheap by American standards. Now it is expanded and thoroughly modern.

When I was here in 1970, Cambodia probably had not changed in 100 years. It still was French Indochina in appearance and culture. French was still the language of culture, commerce and tourism (what little there was of it), and I found my vestigial French quite useful. The same time I was here, the U.S. backed coup when Sihanouk was deposed by Lon Nol. It was also the month the U.S. started B-52 raids in Cambodia and invaded six weeks later.

The resiliency of what is now the population of Phnom Penh is astonishing. When Pol Pot and the Khymer Rouge capture the city in 1975 and drove its inhabitants into the countryside, killing most of them, the population dropped from 600,000 to some 30,000, mainly Khymer Rouge soldiers. This is about the same scale of depopulation present in New Orleans when I was there after Katrina, only they weren't killing people. By mid 1975, Phnom Penh was no longer functional, and many buildings and monuments were destroyed. Today, the population is back up to 1.5 million, and the city is thriving.

Tourism is big, mainly Europeans and Australians. The unofficial currency is the U.S. dollar, which makes transactions easy. But Phnom Penh is still gritty, with potholed streets and garbage that remind me somewhat of wartime Vietnam. Cambodia has the highest proportion of war-related amputees of any country in the world, and they are everywhere begging for money.

we have a whole day here before flying to Siem Reap and will visit the National Museum, the Royal Palace and the Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum



Sunrise over the Mekong in Chau Doc



Welcome drink at Raffles Hotel le Royal in Phnom Penh



No smiling or laughing allowed at the Genocide Museum in Phnom Penh



Tuk-tuk in Phnom Penh

Exploring Angkor Wat

Today is August 10, and we got up at 4:30 AM to go out and watch the sunrise (with about a thousand other people) at Angkor Wat. Because it was overcast, we didn't get the full glory, but I'm glad we did it.

Yesterday, we explored Angkor Wat and Angkor Thom in detail and came back to the hotel late afternoon for a nap before going to the Old Market area for dinner. Transportation is by tuk-tuk. There are virtually no taxis here. Tour groups use buses, and individuals and couples use tuk-tuks. The cost was \$12 for the day. Some of the younger travelers rent bicycles.

When I was here in 1970, Siem Reap was about the size of Pt. Reyes Station on a good day. The city was substantially destroyed in the wars but has rebounded to a robust 150,000 today. Visitors to the temple complexes were in the hundreds then; today they are in the thousands or maybe tens of thousands. A pass to the temple complex costs \$20 a day or \$40 for three days, per person. There were only a few hotels before, and most of them were destroyed in the 1970s. Today, there are hundreds of large new hotels, many of them as fine as anywhere in the world, lining the main streets and Highways. Think Orlando.

Maintaining the temples is a constant fight against rain, humidity and the jungle. A number of international organizations are involved. Before 1970, the French were exclusive, but now many countries are involved in this UN World Heritage Site.

Cambodia, and especially Siem Reap is really hot for the international late teen and twenty-something crowd. Travel for the "backpacker" persuasion of young people can be really cheap. They are mostly non-Americans, including Japanese, Canadians, Europeans and Australians. Yesterday, we met a vacationing Cambodian family that lives in San Diego but still has relatives nearby. The restaurant district last night was crammed with mostly young people. Happy hour with \$0.50 beer lasts from 4:00 PM until 10:00 PM. Hundreds of packed restaurants line narrow streets and alleys in an atmosphere that is almost Bourbon Street without the strippers.

They say tourism is down due to the global recession, but it certainly doesn't look that way.

Traffic in both Phnom Penh and Siem Reap is much better than Saigon, which probably holds a world's record for congestion. There are proportionately more cars in Cambodia than Vietnam, which is counterintuitive, but the motorcycle still rules.

Some urban design observations about both Vietnam and Cambodia. Streets are typically built with generous sidewalks, all nicely paved in attractive unit pavers of various kinds, often 20-30 feet wide. But they are totally occupied with parked cars and motorcycles, market stalls, and people simply eating dinner. The result is that pedestrians have nowhere to go but the street and compete with cars, trucks and motorcycles.

On our last day in Phnom Penh before leaving for Siem Reap, we went to the National Museum, the Royal Palace and the Genocide Museum. Phnom Penh has retained most of its Parisian planning, with many wide boulevards, parks and street trees everywhere. It is a thoroughly modern city in many respects.

I am impressed by the seeming liquidity with which capital and business seems to circulate around Asia. These two cities were devastated only 20-



Angkor Wat



Buddhist monk in the temple complex



Shirley bargains with kids selling souvenirs



Ta Prohm

30 years ago, yet today they are repopulated, rebuilt and humming with business and tourism. There don't seem to be a lot of older people around. Millions of the older generations were killed by the Khmer Rouge or otherwise in the wars of the 1970s. The resilience of people who live here is astounding, but there must be source of virtually unlimited capital to finance all this growth – by most accounts, Chinese. It's "build it, and the will come" approach that seems to be working. I wonder if New Orleans will come back so fast.

Global warming and sea level rise is a big concern in this part of Asia. Hey say Vietnam is the fifth most vulnerable country in the world, primarily because of its agriculture rich but low lying deltas.



Kids selling souvenirs



Bayon

On to Bangkok

Last time I did this, I was caught in the coup when Sihanouk was overthrown in favor of Lon Nol in March 1970. The airport at Phnom Penh was closed, and I had no choice but to travel overland to Thailand. Back then, it was not much more than a pig trail, but I understand it is a new highway today.

We were going to retrace that route, but it takes at least 8 hours, not including any delays for the border crossing and changing means of transport. We are due for dinner with Sunthorn Arunanondchai and his wife tonight at 7:00 pm at their home in Bangkok, so there isn't time. Instead we are flying, which takes only an hour. We met Sunthorn Arunanondchai when we both were recognized at the annual University of Arkansas Alumni Awards a few years ago, I for volunteer work and he for being one of Asia's most successful businessmen. Too bad it wasn't the other way around. Sunthorn is President and CEO of the C-P Group, one of Asia's largest corporations. Look them up on Google.

After coming back from the Angkor Wat sunrise yesterday, we visited the furthest out temple, Banteay Srey, which is almost like a scale model of a larger temple with exquisite carvings in pink sandstone. The trip, alone, was worth the time, offering a look at the countryside, including traditional Kymer houses, water buffalo, ricefields and people living their normal lives. On the way back, we hit Ta Keo, Ta Prohm and Banteay Kdei. Ta Prohm is the temple complex that still has giant fig and silk trees growing from the sprawling shambles, giving it that authentic Indiana Jones Temple of Doom look. At all the temple stops, we succumbed to the souvenir peddlers and loaded up on cheap bracelets, hats, scarves and t-shirts.

It is hotter and maybe more humid in Siem Reap than in Phnom Penh, which is cooled by the river, but the afternoon monsoons cool everything down nicely.

We had dinner last night in "Pub Alley," and sat next to a couple from Osaka and another from Paris, both twentysomethings.

At breakfast this morning, Shirley reminded me of a story about her uncle who in frustration over being unable to find white Cambodian pepper many years ago wrote a letter to then Prince Sihanouk and received free about a hundred pounds. Even after distributing it to many friends, the supply lasted decades.

One thing that is striking about both Vietnam and Cambodia is the almost total lack (at least obvious) of armed police or military anywhere. I have not seen a rifle or machine gun yet on this trip, which is different from even Europe. I have the impression that there is little crime, certainly violent crime. I am sure there is corruption, and apparently sex trafficking is a big problem in Cambodia. We were told that everyone in the tourist industry is trained to watch for sexual exploitation of children by tourists and to notify authorities if they are aware of anything suspicious. Tourists are generally deemed safe in both Vietnam and Cambodia. In Vietnam, the communists took away all civilian guns years ago, and the penalty for even possessing a gun is minimum five years in prison.

We have a couple of hours to walk around, then it's off to the airport.



Angkor Wat at dawn



Banteay Kdei



T-shirt peddlers



Angkor Wat

Cooling It in Chiang Mai

Like Dalat, Chiang Mai in northern Thailand is another place I didn't get to before that everybody said was not to be missed. It turned out that Sunthorn's company owns the hotel we are staying in, so at dinner the night before last, he phoned ahead and told them to treat us right. They sent a car and driver to pick us up at the airport and upgraded our room. Nice to know people in high places.

It was the Queen's birthday yesterday, and her photo was everywhere on billboards with lots of celebrations going on. We only had time to tour the Royal Palace complex in Bangkok yesterday before flying to Chiang Mai. We took the water taxi (really a water bus) from our hotel to the Royal Palace, which was really a breath of fresh air in the hottest place we have been yet. Bangkok, at over 10 million, is pretty hard to grasp. Kind of a cross between Los Angeles and New York City. The Royal Palace complex is an exquisite piece of architecture, but we left Bangkok feeling we weren't missing much else.

Chiang Mai is approaching 1 million (officially 150,000) but seems like much smaller city. It is refreshingly quieter, cleaner, cooler and has far less traffic than Bangkok. Today we took a tour that included an elephant training center, an elephant ride of about a kilometer to a fake village, a picnic on a bamboo raft on a jungle river and a visit to several ethnic villages where we once again loaded up on local crafts. Some of it was hokey, but it was fun. Where else can you watch an elephant paint a pretty good picture? There are only about 1,000 elephants left in Thailand, and tourist spots like these may be their last hope. It rained most of the day and cooled off quite nicely.

At the recommendation of the Kaiser travel desk, we have been taking malaria pills since entering Cambodia, but we haven't seen any mosquitoes. It's ironic that mosquitoes are unbearable at our home in Richmond, but don't seem to have found us at all in Southeast Asia.

I have to give up this computer, so more later...



Tamarind Village Hotel in Chiang Mai



Trying on hats in Chiang Dau



Riding the elephant in Chiang Dau

Back in Bangkok

In Chiang Mai last night, the manager of the Night Bazaar, who works for Sunthorn, had met us at the airport and made a date to show us around Chiang Mai. Apparently he turned up sick - I hope its not the dreaded swine flue - and instead sent three friends to entertain us, a British woman and a couple consisting of a Thai woman and a man from Quebec, Canada. They work for an NGO called Chiangmai Family Services - www.familycare.org/asia/thailand/chiangmaifamilyservices - and showed us a wonderful evening courtesy of Sunthorn, including dinner and a tour of the Night Bazaar.

After sleeping in and touring several temples in Chiang Mai, we flew back to Bangkok and checked in to our hotel about 5 PM. Just for the diversity in experience, I booked a guest house about 1/10 the cost of our hotel the first night in Bangkok. Everything is relatively cheap in Bangkok, which is one if the reasons there are so many tourists. Our previous hotel was a huge high rise grand affair on the river but still only about the same cost as the Hotel Mac.

Tonight, we are slumming it, but the neighborhood is worth ten times that of the grand hotel. It is on an essentially pedestrian street lined with restaurants, food stalls and guest houses, what they call in Asia the backpacker district. It is where the action is. I heard on CNN today that Travel and Leisure Magazine had rated Bangkok the third best city in the world to visit and Chiang Mai the 5th best. And we have been in both within the same 24 hours! CNN also noted that Bangkok had the highest happiness rating of any major city in the world.

Even more than Vietnam and Cambodia, Bangkok is swarming with twentysomethings experiencing a summer abroad. We were eating across the table at a street stall from a 22-year old Croatian Italian woman student traveling alone and asked her if she had considered traveling to the U.S. Probably not, she said. Too many guns and too much violence - not really safe.

Tomorrow we head back to Saigon for our last day in Aisa before flying home.



Soi Rambutri in Bangkok



Dinner on the Street on Soi Rambutri in Bangkok



Bar on Soi Rambutri in Bangkok

Sleepless in Saigon

We are back in Saigon with a 3:30 AM wakeup for a 6:00 AM flight.

A little more about last night's "backpacker hotel." It was about \$20 for the night with a room the size of a large walk-in closet. When we went to turn in, we discovered there was only one sheet on the bed, the bottom one. With no phone in the room, I had to get dressed and go down three floors to the front desk (no elevator). About 20 minutes later, they brought up another sheet.

The fan and air conditioner worked just fine. When you're asleep, it doesn't matter where you are. The bathroom was also the shower, all in one space. The shower had hot water but the lavatory didn't. No biggie.

The sign next to the door read, "Checkout time is 11:30. If you would like to extend your stay, let us know before. Otherwise we have to apologize if we rent your room to others."

The sign also advised, "No Smoking," "No Drugs" and "Please take off your shoes while you're in bed." Obviously a clean establishment.

And this was the most expensive room in the hotel!

I used to stay in these places back in the day, but I think I've moved on.

We had breakfast, walked around a while and caught a taxi to the airport, driven by an aspiring race car driver who hit 140 km/hr on the straightaways.

We had a great final dinner near the Continental where we stayed before, and we are off to bed.

Asia at a glance - In a few words, here is my list that sums up Southeast Asia, not in any particular order:

1. Three girls on a Honda, one driving, the second putting on lipstick and the third on a cell phone.
2. Everyone has a cell phone, but I never saw anyone wearing one of those goofy looking bluetooth things stuck in their ear.
2. Motorcycle cops riding tandem. RPD should try this to save gas.
3. World's largest billboards in Bangkok - maybe over an acre. Think what we could rent that for on the Parkway.
4. Summer abroad for international student set.
5. Rice, noodles, pork, chicken, beef, fish and vegetables, preferably fried or barbecued.
6. Cheap beer.
7. Cheap everything.
8. Friendly, helpful and polite people.
9. Young.
10. Hot, humid, cool, rainy and agreeable.
11. Water, water everywhere and not a drop to drink.
12. Entrepreneurial.
13. Optimistic.
14. Tourists from everywhere but U.S.
15. Motorcycles (Vietnam is the only country with a helmet law).
16. No sirens, no guns, no visible crime.
17. Can't have too many Buddhas.
18. Money: Dollars and Dong in Vietnam, Dollars in Cambodia and Baht in Thailand.
19. Family Planning: A Honda can only carry mom, dad and two children.



From the balcony of Hotel Continental look across Dong Khoi



From a hotel rooftop looking south along Nguyen Hue over the Saigon River



Hotel Continental at night



Looking back north along Nguyen Hue to People's Committee Hall (City Hall)

My new i-phone served me well, except for a couple of days in Cambodia it couldn't find a carrier. Asia skipped land line infrastructure and went straight to cell phones. I was never out of range of a tower. I even saw the mahout driving our elephant with a cell phone to his ear 60 miles north of Chiang Mai in Cambodia.

That's it folks. See you back in Richmond.