

Vietnam through Tourist Eyes

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Vietnam Through Tourist Eyes

I have visited Vietnam twice before, but now I want to see more than the big cities, *Hanoi* and *HCMC*. Thus, I booked a holiday in Vietnam, a few days self-organized, and the rest through a travel agency back home.

I am getting quite different insights in the country, but also experience how tourists interact with the host environment, and thus how they experience Vietnam. Since Vietnam as such is not new to me, this perspective is quite different. To start with, there is a paradox. I came to see more of the country, but I end up seeing more Europeans than on my previous trips, when I mainly met locals or expatriates living here. But still, I am most curious to observe the local environment, albeit from a less interactive perspective than in a business context.

Halong Bay



My first excursion from *Hanoi* takes me to *Halong Bay*, and this trip is certainly worth the time – and good value for money. I book the tour with the help of a local friend through a local travel agent.

A minibus takes the group of eleven tourists from *Hanoi* to the coast at *Halong Bay* where we spend two days cruising on a boat with cabins for overnight stay. Eleven is quite a good number because one has people to talk to, but not too many to cause coordination problems and overstressed tour guides. Well, almost because if the others are all in couples it is a bit awkward for the single, and the others had booked a three-day tour, whereas I have only two days, and was thus ‘handed over’ to another group in the morning (actually, the others changed boat, while I stayed). But these are minor practicalities.

As for the trip, the only place I dislike is the first stop – it is really a great trip, so let me tell you the downsides quickly. On the three-hours bus ride we take a break in a back yard where tourist buses converge on a large souvenir shop where little girls are making embroideries and looking rather irritated about all



these people. Really, most of the tourists find it boring. I find it far more interesting to observe local life watching out of the bus, as it is passing through the city and then the countryside. On the way back, the tourist shop for the break was smaller and more suitable. Firstly, it doesn't have the intimidating number of tourists hanging around, and secondly, I can wander back to the main highway, and onto a pedestrian bridge crossing the highway. From a bridge I can watch and take photos of the day-to-day live of people without intimidating them too much. Else, in the busy street and markets of Hanoi, Hué or elsewhere, I find it always very difficult to take a picture of the lively atmosphere of the place. This atmosphere is an aspect that I find most interesting about the country – and it is likely to change or disappear in the next years if economic development continues as successful as in the past decade.

Watching the country pass by on the highway, I notice many places where the rice fields are giving way to industrial developments. First comes a fence surrounding a given plot – often with a big gate or an advertising announcing, which industrial zone is being developed, or which company is locating here. The industrial developments are all rather spacious – in this part of the country land does not seem to be in short supply. Most companies have fenced their area in, using a standard type of fence in the front – about 2 meters fence and then a stone pillar, and possibly all walls on the back. I don't see many people around these places, so they must be mostly working indoors. Some places have large parking lots for bicycles and motorcycles, however.

In watching these industrial developments along the highway from the airport to *Hanoi* as well as the *Hanoi-Haiphong* highway, I make one observation that is puzzling me, and I wonder how to interpret it. On one occasion, I notice an industrial estate with watchtowers at each corner that vaguely reminded me of those that used to decorate the inner-German border. It was also the only US-American company I see along that highway. Why do the Americans (think they) need more security than everyone else? It just baffles me.

Well, that was a rather long introduction. The purpose of the trip is to see *Halong Bay*, designated as World Heritage by UNESCO because of its natural beauty and the unique shape of the islands in the bay. We arrive in the city of *Halong* at a rather chaotic harbour where many tourist groups were making their way to their boats. On the one side are lots of minibuses, and on the other side are lots of ships, with



one small gate between them. Every bus driver tries to drop his group off as close to the gate as possible, and every ship tries to come close on the other side. From the buses one can walk to the gate, on the other side walking is a bit trickier as a few can walk on water (some Vietnamese almost can, with the help of tiny boats). The boats thus form a sort of crowded V-shape on the water. So, boarding the boat requires

climbing across several ships following the tour guide to the chosen boat. Mind your head, and be careful not to slip!

Then, please leave your luggage, and relax on the roof of the boat, while your captain navigates (or pushes) the boat out of this chaos. Anyway, chaos is what this looks like to Western eyes, trained to think that there are always rules and that it would be risky not to stick to them. But it seems to work, we quickly get to the boat, and after some bumping and shuffling we are on the open sea. *Scheint es auch Wahnsinn, so hat es doch Methode*. Next, the ship has to refuel, which happened from another boat lying further out in the harbour.

After these preliminaries, it is time for lunch. We are served fresh seafood, prepared in traditional manner without too much adjustment to (perceived) tourist expectations. I have some grumbles about food later, but this was good, and fairly authentic. And I remember to take a picture before we finish it all off. We have fish on the bone with vegetables (very good, but tricky to eat with chopsticks, which gave me competitive



advantage), cucumber salad (looks like Western food, but is apparently quite common here), Vietnamese spring rolls (smaller than the Chinese ones, thinner wrapping, and more spicy ingredients), steamed shrimp, a fried pork dish, and a tofu dish. All are great. For dinner we have a similar selection, and in addition fresh crab!

From the landing point in *Halong* City, the boat slowly cruises towards the spectacular landscape that makes this area famous. I am not clear how these peculiarly shaped rocks in the ocean geologically came into being; I probably should reread the tourist book. The guide explained it, but his English wasn't very clear. All I can say is that they are limestone, and they just look spectacular. Each rock has a unique shape,



many rising very steep from the sea. They look green although the soil is rather thin and does not support diverse vegetation nor much wildlife. The waves of the sea have been hitting the rocks for centuries, such that many are narrower at the bottom than, say, 2 meters high. Small boats can find

shelter here in the rain. Some rocks even have flat tunnels beneath that allow swimmers to pass under.

Few if any people live on these islands, yet people reside on floating villages and fishing boats in the area. Thus, the sea is at many places been quite busy not



only with tourist boats like ours, but also with local people going about their businesses. Their boats, and houses, are typically rather small, and shelter in the bays formed by the rock. The sea is rich in fish and other seafood such that it provides a base for many Vietnamese living in this area (though the growing tourism provides a welcome additional source of income in recent years).

Our first stop is near a cave in a rock. Along with many other local and foreign tourist groups, we climb from the tiny harbour to the entrance, and then enter into an amazingly large limestone cave. It has many interesting rock formations, of which rocks resembling a turtle and a dragon are of most interest to local visitors. As an exception throughout my two weeks, this cave was visited by groups of local tourists as well as foreign travellers. The cave had some historical significance in the Vietnamese fights against the Chinese rulers of the day, but it is today presented primarily as a natural attraction. From this stop we head to an area of shallow water, where the water was particularly warm and inviting to swim.

For the evening, the boat lies in a small bay in a remote part of *Halong Bay*, near a



floating village. We have dinner on board, and after 6 pm it turns quickly dark. We sit and talk for a while longer of a beer, but retire to our cabins before late. Outside, small lights indicate that the sea is alive with fishermen. On board, the electric light and air conditioning on board is

dependent on a power generator, which unfortunately is not exactly quiet. Thus despite earplugs, I wake up well before 6 am, and spend the next hour or so on the top of our boat, watching local fishermen and women going about their business. They seem to be rather undisturbed by our (relatively) large boat, and are completing their night's work, collecting the fish from many small boats. Around 6:30, the boat with the women and the night's catch of fish on board speeds off to bring the fish to the morning markets in the harbour towns. The men and boys continue to clean the nets, go for a morning swim, have breakfast, or brush their teeth leaning over board.

We, in the meantime, leave the place by seven o'clock to head for another round of swimming in the comfortably warm water. After the exchange of tourist groups on board, we head back to *Halong* city, watching the scenery of surprisingly shaped rock pass by, and relaxing on board. For lunch, we get local food in a big hotel, before heading back to *Hanoi*. I find out that today's travel companions include two couples who make their way backpacking around the world.



Hanoi

Since I have been in Hanoi before, there is less to report in 'new impressions'. The impressions from my first trip are available on my website www.klausmeyer.co.uk/travels.htm. Reading those first impressions again, I find them very lively and noting details that have got used to by now and may find noteworthy any more. First impressions have a unique flair.

Life in Vietnam starts early in the morning, which means a lot of things have happened before I, and most other foreign visitors, open their eyes. One morning, however, I manage to leave the hotel at 6:30 am to see the city before it gets too hot to walk around. I walk to Lenin Park, which surrounds one of the large lakes in *Hanoi*. Old and young are already gathered in the thousands to engage in their morning sports. Many are playing badminton across a net that blocked the path; groups of women are practicing different forms of dance or aerobics to loud music. Lots of people are just walking around, as also fast walking can be good exercise. In fact I am sweating by 7 am simply from walking, and I am wondering why few of the locals ever seem to sweat, since most are doing more athletic activities than myself. By the time I have completed my tour around the lake, many already finished their exercises, and are sitting and enjoying the view across the lake, or have a breakfast noodle soup at on the small stalls or restaurants by the lake.

On the way back to the hotel, I experience another event that one always should be prepared for in these climates (but I am not): a rain shower. It pored heavily for about an hour, and everyone seems to have a simple rain cloth at hand, or disappears from the street. Many may have delayed their motorcycle ride to work for a few minutes, but those who couldn't were prepared. Needless to say, when I arrive back at the hotel, I am soaking wet.



When travelling, one of the experiences I enjoy most is to taste the local food. In Vietnam, it seems, one has to go with local friends to get the real local food – else one may end up with a sanitized version for tourists. I have wonderful noodle soup – that is noodles in soup with whatever on top. If ordered by a Vietnamese, the soup comes with a separate plate of fresh leaves and herbs that are added to the soup according to taste. I have never eaten so many and such a variety of herbs as in Vietnam. They are not even cut into small pieces as in most other cuisines; they are eaten as whole. However, the soups vary greatly in quality. My local friends probably knew some of the best places, but the small food stalls on the roadside that look suspiciously unhygienic to Europeans are also very good. However, the soup offered in the Hotels for breakfast is in my experience much less rich, has small portions, and few herbs. The worst soup I get in a restaurant in a nightlife area where young Vietnamese hang out, but where also lots of backpackers pass through as well. As I am on my own, I look for restaurant with an English-language menu, which may have been a mistake. I had a great view from the balcony over the street. But the food is a disaster – instant noodles with some carrots, spicy but no rich taste. I notice too late that local frequent this place to drink, and not to eat.

Before leaving Hanoi, I spend two hours wandering with a friend through art galleries. I mean real art galleries, and not the many tourist outlays that can be found near the Opera House and in the old town. A colleague had recommended what he considered the best, and he was right. The entrances of the galleries are often very small and thus not easy to find, but they have many more showrooms in the back or on second floor. We are quite impressed not only by the technical skills, but even more by the originality as many artists have developed their personal style, which then may be imitated by others. As we really liked some of the paintings, we ask for some prices – US\$ 3000 or US\$ 2400 for a large canvass is however way beyond the pocket money that I might have available. We also wander though the cheaper outlets that mix with souvenir shops in the old town. Since our colleague had pointed us to the best place in town, we find these other place less exciting. Yet, there is still interesting work to see, which might make for a good office decoration.

Huế

Huế is a small town, with a slower pace of life, fairly relaxed compared to the buzz of *Hanoi* (though I never thought of *Hanoi* as hectic, that's *HCMC*). One can sit on the banks of the perfume river in the evening after sunset, and wonder about the meaning of life, while local teenagers enjoy their night out, or lovers dream about the future. No kids are



begging to buy their wares, and hardly anyone seems to bother about the tourists hanging around. And the teenagers talking to me as tourist seem to be genuinely trying to practice their English rather than trying to sell something (or seeking a rich husband). Hanging out by the perfume river in the evening is relaxing indeed.

I happen to be professionally curious about the beer, so let me give a cultural history of beer as far as I observed it so far. Firstly, Vietnamese seem to be proud of their local beers – one might say like Germans. Yet beer is not a traditional beverage here, all brands are relatively recent arrivals. In Huế, the local brewery dominates the public advertising space with its two brands, Huda and Festival. Huda is “brewed by [!] Danish Technology”. Elsewhere in Asia, when mentioning that I am from Denmark, I get served Carlsberg without even asking for it. In Huế, the waiter points across the river to the huge advertising board and proudly explains that the local beer is brewed in cooperation with Denmark. That Carlsberg owns 50% in the joint venture seems much less well known, in fact I didn't see Carlsberg anywhere on the menus in town. So, if you drink Huda it's good for my shares prices, as Carlsberg gets half the profits (I hope). Yet the new brand from the same brewery, Festival, seems even more popular. The premium brands on offer are mainly Tiger and Heineken, which both are owned by the same Singapore based joint venture of the Dutch multinational. But



locals don't seem to know that. Tiger is perceived to be Asian brand from Singapore, and, surprisingly, priced higher than Heineken, at least in some restaurants.

Locals are served their beer with a large bucket of ice – they put ice in the glass and then pour the beer over it. Thus it becomes rather thin, but cold. On a hot and humid day, when one simply needs a lot to drink,

but it shouldn't get to the head to quickly, this seems to be a good idea. However, tourists are served beer as in Europe – even in the same restaurant at neighbouring tables. Is it because tourists would complain too much, or because the travel guide says never to drink ice because it is not hygienic? Anyway, it is rather peculiar to see service discrimination that one didn't ask for. Similarly for the food, it seems that the Europeans (few Americans in sight here) get a different, sanitized menu, that lacks some of the more interesting local dishes.

On the last dinner in *Huế*, this takes an additional twist. When I order Huda, the waitress told me that she no longer has cold Huda or Festival, and strongly urges me to order Tiger instead (at a higher price). And when I ask for a fish with a Vietnamese name, she refuses to accept my order – saying that this was no good for me, and despite several times asking isn't able to explain why. This may have been primarily a language constraint – the English here is often more willing than fluent – but puzzling all the same. So I have squid again, good but not so special, some beef dish and a Tiger beer. As entertainment a street women lays out her staple of silk paintings in front of me, but even at a price of one dollar, I couldn't find any that I liked. So, I watched locals eating local food and getting drunk on Festival beer on ice, and French tourists almost next to them delight in what they considered local delicacies while sipping red wine.



The red wine brings me to another observation that surprises me in *Huế*. On my earlier trips to *Hanoi*, I have been rather dismissive about the French pretence of considering Vietnam as part of the French-speaking world. I saw little contemporary French presence, nor did I encounter anyone speaking French – apart from one or two elderly men offering motorcycle or cyclo rides, and of course plenty of architecture dating back to the colonial period, such as the famous Opera House. Well, I have to revise my views. In *Huế*, I frequently hear French at the tourist sites; and that eloquent speech does not come from a foreign tourist, but from their local guide,



typically a grey haired man. It seems that the language skills of the French speaking tourist guides is well above that of their younger colleagues guiding in English – and their services are in frequent demand. Shop owners or waitresses typically start conversation with 'where are you from?' to assert which language would be most appropriate, but I have also

been greeted by ‘*parlez vous français?*’ Also in the hotels and restaurants, I frequently hear French as well as, less expected, Spanish. On the other hand, US-Americans and Germans are less present - which makes for quieter ambience.

Of course, I didn’t come to *Huế* to study the local brewing industry – but somehow social scientists turn to field researchers, even on holiday. *Huế* is known and advertised as the “ancient capital” of Vietnam. I tend to associate the word “ancient” with times long gone by, such as the Greek and Roman empires that ruled Europe over 2000 years ago. The ruin here may look that old, but let me say up-front that ancient here refers to the Nguyen dynasty that started at the beginning 19th century, later became puppets of the French during colonial times, and abdicated to Ho Chi Minh in 1945. If the ruins even so remind me of Roman artefacts in Europe, then this is mainly an indication of viciousness of the French and later American bombs that tore everything of value apart along the frontlines in central Vietnam.



The historical areas in *Huế* make for wonderful romantic walks, holding hands, and reminiscing about the passing of time. Grass and trees have taken over many areas where once royal palaces stood, and cover remains of blackened monuments from a different time.

The neighbourhood of colourful renovated building and greyish ruins creates peculiar contrasts. Too bad I am travelling alone, and there was no time for romantic philosophising.

The tourist guide naturally is keen to point out the wonderfully restored buildings that provide a glimpse of the former glory. A lot of money has been invested here since the UN declared *Huế* a world heritage place, along with Cham Temples at *My Tho* in the mountains. The emperors created a citadel that encompasses the entire old town, and within that an imperial city and a forbidden city that may have been stimulated by *Beijing* – at a time when the Chinese empire had also started its decline. The imperial part of the citadel contains most of the historically interesting buildings, or better their remains and reconstructions. Particularly impressive is the main gate towards the South, from where the emperor once upon a time may have addressed his people.



Wandering the old town outside the imperial city shown to the tourists, I feel like walking through outskirts of a town, with strong rural roots. It is all very green and quiet, with little traffic and trees overgrowing the narrow streets. The modern city of Hué is mainly on the other side of the river.

Outside the city, I am shown a famous pagoda and tombs of the emperors. The pagoda is reached by boat cruise on the perfume river. The river does not smell like perfume any more, but it is a romantic thought that once upon a time the flower blossoms of the gardens and forests upstream were floating on the river and gave it a special scent. In fact, the water is rather muddy, which the



tourist guide blamed on road construction work upstream. Let's hope he is right, and it will all be clear blue water again soon. But, actually, none of the rivers I saw in Vietnam had clear water. The river was busy with considerable boat traffic. In some areas, houseboats are mooring – small fragile-looking boats that house entire families that spend most of their lives on the rivers. On the river, rather unusual were the equally small boats that carried a special kind of sand, or cement, dug from the riverbed and used for construction work downstream. They were so close the waterline that I fear a little wave might sink them.

The pagoda itself is under reconstruction, so there is little to see apart from the general atmosphere of a Buddhist shrine. I note here, as in the imperial palaces and tombs, the extensive use of Chinese characters in their Vietnamese adaptation. Today's Vietnamese usually can't read them, though today's tourist guide seems to



know some basics. It's easy – and thus to be avoided – to embarrass Vietnamese by reading some characters of these old inscriptions that they don't understand themselves – even though it is their history that is recorded here. I was aware that Vietnam had changed to the Latin-based alphabet using a system developed by a French monk four hundred years ago. What surprises me was that even so Chinese characters appeared to be used on many buildings throughout the Nguyen period when officially the new script had been adopted.

In the afternoon, I see two tombs of emperors of very different character. We first visit to the most recent one built at the end of the 1930's. It was built to impress,

with building elements and architects from many parts of the world. The outer buildings are decorated extensively but built in concrete, which with the teeth of time looked black and thus not very appealing. The inner sanctuary, where the second-last emperor has been buried, has very rich mosaics that are more impressive than the buildings as such. This emperor apparently had the desire to impress, while yielding very little power indeed as Vietnam had become a French colony. The very last emperor has not been honoured with a tomb as he abdicated in 1945 and died in France in exile in the 1990s.



The second tomb is much more to my liking, although not necessarily well maintained (or maybe because it shows the passing of time). The emperor had built the group of buildings as residence during his

live time as well as for his eventual burial. He apparently was both romantic and sentimental in mind, and built a wonderful lake of lotus flowers with little houses overlooking the lake. The emperor is said to have written poetry here in the company of his – I forgot how many – concubines. But he never had any children, and it is said that this made him a sad person. His story gives lots of food for reflection for a longer walk around the surrounding parks, across overgrown ruins and smaller ponds. To bad I don't have time nor company for that.

Hoi An

Hoi An is an old town with a rich history, but it lost its influence in the 19th century when the river became too small for growing ships. *Da Nang* then took over as the main port and the main business centre of central Vietnam. From *Huế*, we travel on the Highway 1 that connects North and South Vietnam along the coast. We passed several lagoons, including the supposedly largest in Asia. Stationary fishing activity was visible across much of the lagoons as the low water depth facilitates raising fish, shrimp and other seafood.

Eventually we cross the highest pass separating the North and the South. We drive a steep winding road up the mountain, too steep apparently for many of the lorries that got stuck somewhere along the way. Driving here is certainly no easy task, yet help is on its



way in form of a new 7 kilometre long tunnel. It may be much less attractive for tourists, but it will certainly help the local economy. From the pass we see *Da Nang* in front of us, spreading around a natural bay. We continue along a new highway that was recently build through *Da Nang*, and was quickly joined by new residential building on both sides. *Da Nang* is the economic centre of the region, while *Hué* and *Hoi An* have lost there former influence but their historical sites and (in case of *Hoi An*) the beaches serve as major tourist attractions. There is a lot of building activity in and near *Da Nang*, suggesting a flourishing and rapidly developing local economy.



Hoi An has somehow survived the wars of the 20th century without too much damage to its historical town. In the 16th and 17th century it was a major trading centre with communities of Chinese and Japanese traders. While the Japanese later withdrew (but left a ‘Japanese Covered Bridge’ as reminder of their presence), the Chinese influence is still very visible. For instance, the congregation houses and shrines of different Chinese communities are open to tourists, and they create an atmosphere that resembles similar establishments in Singapore or Hong Kong. The basic structure of the town, with its small and traditionally open houses still reflects the historical structures, but all the houses continue to be used as shops and homes, rather than being converted to museums.

Where once merchants were trading products from all over Asia, today the main trades seems to be tailors, souvenirs, art galleries, tour operators and restaurants for tourists. I use the opportunity to have a suit and two shirts tailored, which fit better than department store produce at home – and cost a fraction.



Only in the traditional open market I have the impression that local were trading with locals. This market, like the one in *Hué*, resembles the street bazaars in other places across Asia: fresh foods in some alleys, and lots of cheap consumer and household goods in other alleys. What I note as a Vietnamese peculiarity were the women selling green leaves of spices of all kinds of variety that look unfamiliar to me, but which reflect the extensive use of fresh herbs in traditional Vietnamese cuisine.

I spend quite some time, again, wandering through the small art galleries. We had certainly seen the masters of the trade in Hanoi. But, I discover many interesting styles, as artists creatively connect traditional motives and techniques with newer influences from the international art scene. Some motives reappear frequently, executed with varying degrees of attention to detail, but other galleries showed work that appeared quite original to my laymen's eyes, and quite decorative. I could fancy myself as an art collector spending someone's money to decorate a home or an office building.



The town of *Hoi An* is a bit overwhelmed with the many tourists stopping here, and thus in danger of becoming just an exhibition place – like many other cities that once were great and powerful but declined and thus preserved, or restored, their historical buildings, from Rotenburg o.T. to Stratford upon Avon. However, the beach resorts seem to have many free rooms, and the restaurants in their vicinity were almost all empty, such that I could choose in which I place I want to eat on my own. I decided to choose the one where at least one other family was sitting. Thus, the tourism infrastructure is expanding faster than demand, yet the limits can already be anticipated.

I spend the next morning on the beach, doing what tourists are expected to do – do nothing and lie on the beach – but in the shade. I have been reading a book, and been musing about its contents, and took a swim in the hotel pool. Otherwise I have been observing people. Broadly speaking the tourists in the resort only interact within their own group – and most of the groups are families with teenage children, young children, or no children. For their entertainment, people take a swim, or cruise the sea on a scooter.



The guests at this resort speak many different languages, with English in all its variations (British, Australian, even American) probably most common, but followed closely by French and Spanish. To my left was a German father with his almost-teenage daughter who seemed to get bored most of the time such that daddy had to come up with ways to entertain her. Then there was an Asian American women – more tanned than any Asian middle class

women would consider pretty – and her American boyfriend. On the far left is a French-speaking Asian family, presumably Vietnamese who settled in France and abandoned their native tongue in favour of the adopted one (I noted similar families in *Huế*). And later three Danes are hanging around a bit further in front of me, obviously unconscious that someone here might understand their talk. The only locals present were the hotel staff and teenage girls in white heads trying to sell souvenirs, but apparently prohibited from coming too close to the hotel's own beach. Holiday in a beach resort means staying in an enclave away from real life. A resort may be a good place to relax, but not a place to get to know a country, other than through the excursion-into-town perspective.

Over lunch, I leave the other tourists sweating on the beach, and retreat to my cool air-conditioned room to write down the observations that you are currently reading. I finish reading my book, and wonder how



to write a book review about it. When I come back to the beach after 3 pm, the atmosphere starts to change. The tourists are no longer alone, as local people are arriving at the beach in large numbers. Not on the hotel beach that is, but in the area nearby that is not specifically reserved for the guests of the resort. In their midst a few backpacker tourists relax. I decide to take a walk down the beach to see how life is beyond the confines of the tourist oasis.

I walk for about an hour, which should make 5 kilometres. First, I pass an area where local youths are holding some kind of kite flying competition. There are stalls for drinks (but no food as far as I could see) and beach chairs to sit in the shadow. Children are trying to convince me to sit down, presumably against a fee. Later the beach empties, and I have a long stretch of beach almost for myself. In one area construction at the beachfront indicates the arrival of another resort. Next comes an area with many small fishing boats lying on the beach indicating the activity that would take place here at night. Simple lamps on board of some of the boats attract my attention; presumably they are designed to attract fish at night. When I pass the same area on my way back, fishermen start preparing for the evenings tour, pushing the first



boat to the sea. A flock of children interrupt their game of football to help them.

I continued until I reach an area where locals were enjoying a day – or better an evening – on the beach. Numerous children are jumping up and down in the water, and waving to me as I passed by. The attention of the children suggests to me that this is an area where few tourists would pass by, and certainly not a man walking all by himself. I wave back, and they have their fun. Somehow, it seems that these (relatively) poor kids are more having more fun playing simple games in the water than the (relatively) rich teenagers hanging out with their parents and the resort. Here, the parents are sitting under the shelters, or prepare the evening activities, notably a meal. As I want to be back before nightfall, I head back to where I came, waving to increasing numbers of children bathing in the ocean as I passed by.



On Saturday, I decide to post some of my luggage back home because it became too much to carry through my next travels. So, I experience how a Vietnamese post office works. There are many forms to complete, mostly containing the same information – from whom to whom and what is the content. Then the clerk checks the contents and together with a colleague packs the parcel. All this occurs without much hectic, and while serving many other customers in between, most of whom just want some information or a stamp. That's how polychronic cultures work. In Europe, she probably would look after me as only customer at a time, while all others have to wait in line. Also in Internet Cafés, I have become a bit of an expert now. The fastest connection and the cheapest prices are in the post office. Small Internet Cafés offer acceptable service; they are busy with chatting teenagers, and charges vary with rather unpredictable prices. The highest price and the quietest environment are in the hotel's business centre – but it is only worth the money if urgent matters are at stake.

At the weekend, the guests of the resort change, with at least one busload of tourists arriving, including lots of Australians and some Japanese. Also some Vietnamese families spend the weekend at the resort. Their middle class dress, their quieter manners and the lighter skin of the ladies clearly distinguishes them the local people. From a distance, I might even confuse them with the Japanese. As the heat is not as bad as the days before, I spend most of the time by pool or on the beach, reading my books and occasionally taking a swim.

Sitting on the beach, and reflecting over the book that I am reading on cross-cultural management, I observe polychronic Vietnamese and monochronic tourists sharing the same beach. Most Westerners lie stretched out on the ground, with few clothes on, and aiming to get as much as sun as possibly, while entertaining themselves with a book. When they go swimming, they swim on their own, heading often as far out as

their sportive abilities permit. Exceptions apply to lovers of all ages, who seem attached to each other all the time.

Vietnamese on the beach are always active, at least by sitting and watching other people. Groups of men play football, while children play all kinds of games casually observed by their mothers. Mostly, the children and their mothers play in the water, in larger groups and having fun together. Men also take a bath in groups, but not normally playing with the kids. And, naturally, the Vietnamese come to the beach only after when the hottest part of the day is



over as sweating and getting burned in the sun is no fun.

In *Hoi An*, I am enjoying the local cuisine. I figured out that the smaller family restaurants probably provide the most authentic meals even though they primarily – but not exclusively – serving tourists. Family restaurants here seem to be run by mothers, with daughters helping serving the guests and doing the dishes, while fathers are hanging around, and do little apart from fixing the fan or sorting the chairs. Sons were not in sight in the places I visited. Locals eat mostly at very small food stalls that appear to be mainly often one-women businesses. In the last three days I have plenty of seafood including fresh crab and steamed fish. Local specialities include cao lau (a noodle dish with meat and herbs), white rose (similar to dim sum dumplings in *Hong Kong*), and fried wonton with vegetable. Unfortunately, I forget each time to take a picture of the food – I was too hungry and too curious about what I was being served. The selection of local beers on offer is quite different in *Hoi An* then in *Hué*, only three hours North. Rather than Huda and Festival, the restaurants offer 333, Sai Gon and Biere Larue in addition to the popular Tiger and the less popular Heineken.

Mekong River Delta

I skip *HCMC*, or as many people in the South colloquially still call it, *Sai Gon*, and travel directly from the airport to *My Tho* for a boat tour on the Mekong River. My first impression of the Mekong River is, that it would be



impossible take a good photo. It's all light brown water, then a thin grey line at the horizon, and above is the blue sky. Well, as we sail around the river and its many islands, I later find many worthwhile photo motives.

The boating tour starts from *My Tho* in a small boat, crossing the huge Mekong to *Ben Tre* Province, and cruising around a group of four islands in the stream. I observe many boats, including small ones like I have seen in *Hué* or



Halong Bay, but also a few larger ones. Ferries are crossing the river, including, as I am proudly told, new ones sponsored by the Danish government. It seems locals know fairly well who contributed what in terms of aid projects.

The lunch is served in an open restaurant in the mangrove forest, reached from the seaside over a long bridge. The serving of the food is a celebration of the elephant-ear fish and the Vietnamese spring roll. The fish is served upright to show its beauty, and why locals gave it this name. The Vietnamese spring rolls are created by taking the thin rice paper, making it slightly wet with water, adding fish, some noodles and a few green leaves from the big bowl of fresh herbs. Then the whole assemblage is rolled up in a little parcel, and dipped into a spicy sauce. The preparation resembles a bit Beijing Duck, but it tastes very different from any Chinese food that I have had. And it tastes great, especially when prepared with such fresh ingredients as on this island in the Mekong River. We then have a number of other exciting dishes as well, but they couldn't compete with the fish spring roll. The restaurant has specialized on this fish and all visitors are served the same fish.



The boating tour continues through channels and between the islands. After following a narrow channel for a while, we stop at a tiny landing where a small plant dries longan fruit for further processing. We catch a horse carriage for a ride across the tiny country roads observing local people, houses and shops in passing. The trip ends at a honey bee farm, where the tourist guide convinces me to hold the python for a picture (it later emerges

that she never did this herself), and where we have tea flavoured with honey. However, it seems the bees want their honey back, so we have to drink rather carefully. On a paddleboat we travel down another very small channel until we reach

our boat waiting at the mouth of the channel. The next stop is at a small family business making coconut flavour candy (and selling souvenirs to the tourists).

I spend the night at a small farmhouse in the middle of tree gardens, where a large variety of trees and plants are grown commercially. The most important seems to be longan, a fruit that is similar to lychee, but smaller. It is used for many purposes, and afterwards the hard skin and the stone are used as firewood. We go for a walk in the gardens, past many trees that looked unfamiliar to me. Bicycles and motorbikes are the vehicles of transport as the paths are too narrow for cars. We pass a family taking care of their ox, and a women cutting herbs in what looked to me the wild grass by the roadside. When we pass a small stand selling sugarcane juice, I am persuaded to try to operate the machine – very much to the entertainment of all the locals who apparently never have seen a tourist do such manual work. The guides have great fun, and will talk about this occasion for the rest of my stay in Vietnam.



I stay in a simple wooden house, that is large enough for a family and the guests from the tourist agency, and as all houses in this area connected to electricity. So, the TV is running most of the time. The lady of the house serves us the dinner, which again is very good, as all the food I have in the Mekong Delta area. I spend the night on a hard bed under a Mosquito net, and get up again early as it became light, and the engines of the boats passing wake me up. The home stay ends with breakfast and then we sail back to our starting point in *My Tho*.

The next outing starts from *Can Tho* through the floating markets to an area with traditional cottage industries. The boats of the traders are moored in the area, each displaying on a long stick which fruit they are selling today. Yet in the late morning most of the market activity of the day is already over. We stop to see traditional crafts folk including the production of rice paper, popcorn made from rice, and various kinds of candy. Most of these are family businesses, involving an 80-year-old making rice paper, and teenager packing the popcorn or candies a few metres down the road. Outside, rice paper and other items are spread out for drying. The tiny ovens used in many of these businesses are fired by dried coconut shells or by the outer parts of the rice.

I am told that these products are exported, but I keep wondering if there aren't any economies of





scale and modern technologies that would soon replace these family businesses with larger factories. And, I am wondering if the children are missing out in school if they are needed to keep the family business going. Apparently, it is summer holiday when I am visiting, but how about in autumn? Either way, I am probably visiting the last of a kind, and only with side income from tourism will these industries continue to exist, even in Vietnam larger businesses are manufacturing more efficiently.

We continue our Mekong cruise through more channels, and with changing vegetation. The overall impression in these channels is green, and the main plant at the riverside is a watercoconut, which looks like palm leaves growing directly out of the water. Local people go about their daily chores without paying much attention to the tourist boat. The waterways are the main means of transport in this area, only partly supplemented by bikes and motorbikes where roads and bridges are more solid. But the water is also an important resource, not just because it is rich in fish, but for daily activities such as bathing and washing clothes. It seems peculiar to me, but the light brown colour is mainly due to sand in the water, and it does no harm for people swimming or washing themselves in the water, and clothes do get clean from washing in the river.



We take a rest with tea in the house of an old scholar who grows bonsai in his front garden, serves tea and lunch to the tourists, and collects their business cards to display under the glass of the tables. After tea and some fruit, we take a nap in the hammocks in the rear garden, between longan trees and elephant-ear-fish ponds.



As we continue, a heavy rain comes up, and we reach a place for lunch just in time, and ahead of larger groups of tourists. We have spring rolls with elephant-ear fish again, but not quite as tasty and elegantly prepared as on the first day. Heavy rain comes down while we are eating, so we prolong our stay with a cup of coffee. The place becomes busier and noisier as the neighbouring tables were taken over by French tourists, so we sit in another of the open houses with a traditional roof made from the leaves of the water coconut. There we observe a monkey that tries, and succeeds, to steal at least part of the

fruits that an overly curious tourist was carrying with her; and a smart animal handler convinces a group of tourists to be photographed with a python.

My journey continues to a tiny port, and then by car for 4 hours to *Chau Doc*, near the Cambodian border. Along this way, the roads get narrower, and the houses smaller. Even so, there is a lot of motorbike and bicycle traffic. After a ferry crossing, we have a wider road again, but it begins to rain, and it continues until we arrived in *Chau Doc*. Local motorcyclists seem only little irritated by the weather, though some are thoroughly soaked. At times the road is without proper pavement because of construction work to raise the dam on which the road is built to provide better protection against floods. In recent years, flooding had caused considerable damage in this area as the Mekong carried more water than usual on its ways from China and Indochina. New bridges were being constructed, and especially the access to these new bridges was over bumpy mud roads. Driving must be difficult on these roads, even in good weather conditions.

We arrive in *Chau Doc* at the break of night. This is the poorest town that I have been to so far on this trip, though possibly the poor quality road was more due to construction than to poverty as such. Even so, I stay at a very fancy hotel, which makes me feel somewhat awkward given the poverty around. But even here, the few tourists that come add to the local economy, and the more money they leave behind the better. My last dinner in Vietnam is with Vietnamese fish dishes in a small local restaurant, where we run into some of the same tourists we had seen at lunch time.

Cambodia

This famous poem is displayed in the lift of the hotel in *Chau Doc*, seeking to seduce guests to try Vietnamese massage. I was thinking of it during the next day as we were making our way up the Mekong. Though, for this part of the world, it

*Two roads diverged in the woods,
and I, I took the one less travelled by,
and that made all the difference.*

might we re-written as ‘two waterways diverged in the Mekong’. The more travelled road goes via the airport of HCMC. The less travelled one sees had six passengers this morning, a Belgian family from London, and myself.

We depart at 7 am for the five-hour journey with the speedboat from *Chau Doc* to *Phnom Penh*. Initially the river is busy as always in Vietnam, with smaller villages and fish farms in floating houses stretching along the riverside. Gradually, the villages became more dispersed, but we see many activities related to growing, processing and transporting rice in the area. In other areas, small sheds provide home for the poorer people living on the Mekong River. Most buildings, rich or poor, were build on pillars, thus allowing the river to rise even further.



The Cambodian border at the Mekong is a lonely outpost in the middle of (almost) nowhere. Apart from local cyclists and the occasional motorcyclist we are the only customers, and apparently the only ones worth checking carefully. It seems that the customs and border controls have nothing to do all day, so I am not surprised that they took their time to process us. First, we go through the Vietnamese emigration. We are asked to sit and wait in an open and reasonably comfortable area, as the tour guide accompanying the boat took care of everything. We see our luggage being carried to the customs office, and back. Since mine has a lock they can't have looked inside. Then we go back on board – no problem, just time consuming.

A few hundred meters on comes the second stop: Cambodian immigration. Since I already have a visa, I am told to hang around and wait as the others get their visa application processed. An officer of border police joins to chat with me. Is he just casually interested in people passing through his lonely world, or was this part of the official immigration procedure? I practice my skills of replying without answering. After asking how much I earn and how much my ticket costs (which I answered as vaguely as possible), he tells me that he is 37 years old, earns US\$ 30 a month, and every month he gets 3 days off to go to *Phnom Penh* to spend with his wife and two children. Well, the usual introduction to ask for some ‘facilitation payment’. Too bad for him that there is nothing in need of facilitation today, the lady from the travel agency settles everything and we are on our way again.



In all, it takes us almost an hour to get out of Vietnam and into

Cambodia – like in the old days in Eastern Europe. During this time, no other ships pass by, neither passenger nor cargo ships. I asked the ‘friendly’ police officer how much activity there was at the border, and he tells me that the next tourism ship from *Phnom Penh* comes at 11 am; in total three different companies are travelling down the river. During the entire 5-hour journey, we notice only one passenger ship coming the other way, with hardly more passengers than on our little boat. This river has the potential of being Cambodia’s primary export channel, and a gate for tourists, but it is literally deserted. The relationship between Cambodia and Vietnam doesn’t look too good.



Cruising the Mekong northbound, we pass through thinly populated land, and people living in poverty. In Vietnam, even in the last kilometres towards the border, it somehow always seems busy, and people had some basis to live on with half decent houses, clothes and boats. On the Cambodian side, the houses along the river are tiny and made from wood, at best, and typically on large wooden pilings to protect people from the floods of the river. People are scantily clad, and occasionally small children run around without any clothes, not only when taking a bath in the river. Where there are boats, they have been repaired many times in improvised ways. Between the houses, cows are grazing. However, even rather derelict looking houses have TV antennas, and must thus have access to electricity.



The landscape appears even flatter than in Vietnam, partly because the Mekong is wider with fewer islands, partly because trees are not as high. There are many fields but I can’t see what is growing here; it is not a rice economy but some form of low intensity farming. Cows are grazing, and children are playing on the fields. The children are almost all waving at the

boat passing by, for them it must be a rare, at best once in a day event of seeing foreigners passing on this river. We pass only one city all the way from the border to *Phnom Penh*, but we didn’t stop. However, even in the poorest areas, we see fairly large and well-maintained pagodas – they seem to be important to the Cambodian people. I also see about five large factories with simple large buildings and a wall around them during the last hour before reaching *Phnom Penh*.

My first sight of *Phnom Penh* is a huge construction site, creating a building that far exceeds the height of any existing buildings, apparently a new hotel. The large hotels

and pagodas next to the big new hotel are built in traditional styles and at first remind me of Thailand. The boat lands at a small dock, where more taxi drivers are waiting then there are people



on board. But the local pick up functions perfectly as all passengers have prearranged their tour. So, it's no business for any of the drivers, but the person insisting of carrying my suitcase earns himself a tip.

My tour of the city starts in the National Museum, which shows artefacts from 2000 years, not well sorted and quite a few with 'period unknown' or 'location unknown'. The tour guide naturally focuses on the better know pieces outlining the pre-Angkor, Angkor, and post-Angkor periods. I learn that Cambodia traditionally had Hindu religions, but gradually turned to Buddhism. Early traces of culture thus are very similar to India. While the country is today mainly Buddhist, Hindu roots are still reflected in many decorations in art and official buildings.



Next, I visit the Royal Palace in the centre of the city. The palace area reminds me of Bangkok, both the stupas where the cremated remains of past kings are stored, and the buildings of Royal Palace and the side houses, especially their curved roof decorations. The

main attraction here is the coronation hall that is used only once in a king's lifetime – except for the current king who was crowned twice. At the time my visit, he is recovering from illness in Beijing and considering his retirement. The tour through the city emphasises the modern parts and the buildings from the French period. Tour ends with a visit at an old pagoda on the hill where Phnom Penh once was founded. Today this is a local shrine complete with beggars. This makes me notice that even though Vietnam is not a rich country, I have hardly seen war invalids or been bothered by beggars in Vietnam. Somehow the socialist government is either taking care of them, or removing them from public sight.

After this long tour, I am hungry and tired, so I set out to find some place to eat. I walk around the area of the old (French-build) market hall, and find that it all looks rather miserable. One can hardly walk on the pavements because people had spread their businesses there; the roads are poorly paved, dirty and wet from the rain. The roads are hard to cross as traffic appears even less predictable than in *HCMC*. It makes me feel rather uncomfortable to walk around.

Eventually I find a shopping mall. Apparently recently opened, this place reminds me a little bit of Hong Kong and Singapore. It is not a fancy place, but it could just as well have been one of the older malls in Singapore, or somewhere in Hong Kong New Territories. The consumer goods of the world are there, including the latest flatscreen TVs by Philips and Toshiba. Since I am pretty hungry by now, I am pleased to find a McD-type fast food restaurant on second floor and had some chicken. Then, I ascend further to the fourth floor, where I find a food court that very much reminds me of HK and Singapore. Well, not as nice, all looks a much simpler – but after seeing poverty on the streets outside, I am pleasantly surprised at this middle-class teenager hangout. I decide that I had not yet eaten enough and get myself some spring rolls as desert. The only complication is that I first have to get coupons to be used for payment.

After finishing eating, I head for the exit – but the usual Asian afternoon rain shower was coming down as the heavens had opened the floodgates. So, I go back inside and do some market research. Most of the consumer goods, like clothing and toys looked very Chinese, including the designs and advertising. In the supermarket, I found products from all over Asia: Thailand, Singapore, China, and Japan. The local beer is called Angkor, but there is also Anchor, which is brewed under license from same Singaporean company that makes Tiger and Heineken in Asia. So, after seeing a lot of poverty during the day, the visit to the shopping mall suggested to me that even Cambodia has joined the path of Asian consumerism, and has a chance to move out of poverty following the path of other countries in the region.



The speedboat to *Siem Reap* departs early the next morning with some 50 people on board. It sails really fast, and too fast to take many pictures. *Phnom Penh* stretches quite far out to the North, while along the Mekong the River to the South we saw rice fields on the right side when the city centre came into view on the left hand side. We progress through poor and thinly populated areas. The *Tonle Sap River*, on which we are

travelling, is worldwide unique in that the direction of flow changes with the seasons. When the *Mekong* carries a lot of water from upstream, water flows through the *Tonle Sap River* into the *Tonle Sap Lake*, and at the end of the rainy season it flows out again. It is a natural water level regulation system – but fragile and sensitive to human intervention. In recent years, water levels have been unusually high at the lower Mekong, and I see quite high water levels in August although the peak is not expected

until late October. I get worried for the villages at the lower Mekong that I passed by during the recent days.

We cross the lake for about an hour; it is probably 100 km long and at the widest point 30 km wide. From the lake, we pass through a narrow river mouth towards *Siem Reap*. The river is so narrow that small oncoming ships have to stop by the side to let us pass. On both sides are the homes of poor people, apparently moved up here from areas now flooded, a kind of mobile home. They are going after their daily chores, mainly related to fishing, while children, were playing and waving at the tourists. Children without clothes on, embarrassed yet still curious, hold pieces of wood to cover them while waving. The arrival is quite chaotic as we reached land via fragile wooden planks, and taxi drivers were



fighting for customers. After seeing so much chaos and poverty, it is a positive contrast to pass through the better suburbs and see solidly build and maintained middle class homes, typically with the traditional structure of tall pillars creating an open space below the house used for storage, parking, or children's play and the actual house in the first floor – similar to traditional Thai houses.

Angkor

Visiting *Angkor* is visiting the history of a country that, as so many, once was powerful and rich but is far from its former glory today. So, I read at least a little on *Khmer* history to understand what to expect, and I have to summarize it here to make my observations in *Angkor* better understood.

The heyday of the *Khmer* empire was from the 9th to the 14th century. Initially, Hinduism was the dominant religion, and the first king of the *Khmer* had himself crowned as god-king in a Hindu-sense. His capital was in *Roluos*, a few kilometres East of *Siem Reap*. The capital it was moved



several times before *Angkor*, a few kilometres north of *Siem Reap*, became the capital. The early temples in *Roluos*, which I was shown on the first day, were devoted to this king and his family and immediate descendents. I started with the oldest temple, *Lolei*, with four towers, then visit *Préah Ko* with six towers, and *Bakong* with one major tower on a five-platform artificial hill. These temples are decorated with numerous images of Hindu gods and mythical figures – students of Indian history would feel quite familiar here, but for me this is an unknown religion, which makes understanding the symbolism of the temples a bit difficult. But then there are guides who tell the history as well as the meanings.



The early temples were built with brick, but soon sandstone transported from a mountain 60 km away became the dominant material. Since the temples have partly been overgrown, and in particular during the civil war no one, not even the Buddhist monks, took care of them, they have largely fallen apart. There are only small remnants of the outer decorations,

especially where this was made from plaster. Some beautifully figures carved in sandstone are still visible.

The largest temple that I see on the first day, *Bakong*, ascends with five squared plateaus to the ultimate temple at the top. On each plateau, an elephant guards each of the four corners, but all of them have lost their trunks. Lions guard the staircases, but some of them have entirely withered away. Although the current structure gives only a vague idea of the original structure, it is impressive by the size and by the artwork visible in some better-maintained corners of the monument. This temple used to stand in the middle of a major city, but apart from the moat around the temple, and remains of the water reservoirs that fed the city and its rice field, little seems to be known about how people actually lived in this city.

My visit to *Angkor* itself starts in *Angkor Thom*. This was once a big city, housing some 20,000 people. Traditionally most houses would be



made from wood, thus no traces are left today. What can be seen is impressive enough. The city walls seem rather complete, and outline a quadrangle of 3 by 3 kilometres. Visitors enter by crossing a bridge across the moat, lined by 42 statues on each side, the gods to the left and the daemons to the right, and then through a large gate from which the face of Buddha looks in all



four directions. In the city a huge temple marks the geographic centre. The temple, called *Bayon*, was built by a king who had adopted Buddhism, and thus four the faces of Buddha are looking in four directions from each of the originally 56 towers. Engravings around the temple at the lower level show in great detail the history of the *Khmer* people at the time. They show ordinary life of fishing and hunting, as well as many wars with the *Cham* people, who lived in what is today Central Vietnam and who temporarily occupied the Khmer country. Originally, the temple was decorated with many Buddha statues, as befits a Buddhists temple, but they were removed by a subsequent ruler who reverted to Hindu faith.

The city of *Angkor Thom* encompassed an imperial city, which was the home of the king of the time. It is surrounded by a still existing wall within the larger wall surrounding the city. The area contains several remains of massive stone buildings and a reservoir – while forests now cover large areas that presumably were once occupied by wooden houses including the king’s residence. However, near the main



archaeological sites, the big trees are now in most parts towering over low vegetation to facilitate the preservation and allow tourists to visit the sites. Many buildings of historical interest have been restored or even reconstructed with foreign aid donations.

The main structure still existing in this imperial city is a 300-meter long terrace decorated with life-size elephants guarded by larger than life sized monkeys. Once, the king and his ministers would present themselves to the people from up here. At the Northern end, is a restored shrine that is surrounded by a narrow alley representing the underworld, and decorated by very detailed carved devils (or whatever they are supposed to represent). Other ruins include a major coronation building – a steep pyramid-shaped



structure resembling some of the temples, a reservoir, a temple currently being reconstructed by French archaeologists, and a Buddhist shrine overgrown by trees. I came back to this site the next day to walk around and explore the site on my own, discovering new angles and the atmosphere of ancient ruins in a large park. Angkor Thom is not only a historical site, but also a lovely park, though one has to fight off tourist guides to enjoy it.

Children were eager to show me some hidden places that were half overgrown by trees. They expected a tip, not surprisingly, but then bitterly complained about what I gave them. Yet they were fearful of following me directly to any of the sites as their freelance guiding is apparently against the rules.



The most famous temple of the area is

Angkor Wat, a huge temple complex of about 2 km² inclusive the moat. One enters across a long bridge through the main gate in the middle of the Western wall. From afar one can see the characteristic shape of the main temple with one big and two smaller towers. Actually, there are four smaller towers but they are arranged at the corners of a square such that only two are visible when entering through the main gate. At the lower level of the temple engravings tell Hindu mythological stories in great detail. It seems there are always some armies fighting each other. The other remarkable decoration are beautiful



dancers called *Askara* – in total, so I am told, there are 1850 of them on the pillars and walls of the remaining parts of *Angkor Wat*. The central part of the temple again is hard to climb, and the tour guides apparently prefer to stay down. The central tower contains four Buddhas facing in the four direction of the universe. And from up here, one has view far over the rainforests.

This temple is also remarkable for how much has remained in place, probably because Buddhist monks have taken over the place and its maintenance in past centuries. It has also been the focus on decades of restoration and reconstruction work sponsored by many different countries, including France, Japan and Germany. The temple is open for climbing up and looking out, and most

tourists climb up the steep staircases not only to see the Buddha statues in the central tower, but also to enjoy the view from the many windows over the rainforest and the open spaces in front of the temple.

Especially in *Angkor Wat*, I notice the ever-present Japanese tourists, quite in contrast to Vietnam, and local guides speaking Japanese seem ready available. They use the many opportunities to take pictures not only of the antique structures but also of each other, for the folks back home.



On my final day, I visit is *Ta Prohm*, also known as the ‘temple in the jungle’. This time, I go without a tourist site and only with a moto-driver to explore the place on my own. A heavy rain shower comes down as I was approaching the temple, and through the rain

I see a crumbling gate and big trees standing not just nearby but growing on top of the walls. I am talking big trees here – they may be two or three hundred years old. Yet, it is not just one tree, many trees grow in this fairly large temple area. As a visitor, one discovers this place like archaeologists in the jungle: following paths and corridors

that seem to be open, being amazed by the trees, by the ruins, and by specific details of the engravings that are, while covered with moss, still clearly recognizable. Then one reaches a dead end, and has to find the way back and explore in another direction. The rain adds to the mystic of the place. Of course, tourist guides would be happy to show the direct way, but that would destroy the fun of discovery.

This temple has been completely abandoned centuries ago, and the rain forest had completely taken over. Little renovation work has been undertaken here in recent years, apart from securing access for visitors. It has become famous recently because it featured in the Hollywood movie *Tomb Raider*, and I can well imagine how the mystical atmosphere inspired the moviemakers. Finally, I also climb up *Ta Krá*, another very steep pyramid-type temple, from where I enjoyed a fine view over the rainforest.

Before leaving Cambodia, I round up my journey by getting a local massage. It was similar to Thai massage and very professional done (though the masseuses spoke no English). After a day of walking around ruins in the forest, it provides me with the right relaxation before the 8 pm departure for the 16 hours trip back to Europe.

