

**Bangkok to Beijing via Laos and Vietnam
February – April 2007**

Part 1

**Bangkok to Hong Kong
via
Laos and Vietnam**

February - March 2007

Jim Russell

Contents

Contents	1	Mekong River	37
Itinerary	3	History	38
Laos, Hanoi, China – March – April - 2007	3	History of Laos.....	38
Part 1	3	Monarchs of Lan Xang.....	39
Part 2	5	Siamese Satellite	39
MAPS	7	Land of the Lotus-Eaters	40
Bangkok to Hanoi.....	7	Civil War Skirmishes	41
Hanoi to Hong Kong.....	8	The Dirty War.....	42
Hong Kong to Beijing	9	Pathet Lao Victory	42
Bangkok to Hanoi	11	Friday 2nd March 2007- Mekong River	44
Saturday 24th February 2007 - Melbourne to Bangkoki	11	Pak Ou Caves	45
Thailand's History.....	11	Luang Prabang.....	46
Early years.....	11	History	47
Sukhothai Period(1238-1438)	11	Saturday 3rd March 2007 - Luang Prabang	48
Ayutthaya Period(1351-1767)	11	Royal Palace Museum.....	48
Thonburi Period(1767-1782).....	12	The building	48
Rattanakosin Period (1782-Present).....	12	Sunday 4th March 2007 – Luang Prabang	53
From absolute monarchy to constitutional monarchy.....	13	Monday 5th March 2007 – Luang Prabang - Vang Vieng.....	56
Sunday 25th February 2007 - Bangkok	13	Vang Vieng.....	57
History of Bangkok	14	Town history	57
Wat Pho.....	19	Vang Vieng today	57
Monday 26th February 2007 - Bangkok.....	21	Tuesday 6th March 2007 - Vang Vieng - Vientiane	58
Tuesday 27th February 200 - Chiang Mai.....	27	Wednesday 7th March 2007 - Vientiane	61
Wat Chedi Luang	31	Vientiane	61
Wat Phra Sing.....	32	Administration	62
Wat Suan Dok.....	33	Geography	62
Wednesday 28th February 20 - Chiang Mai - Chiang Khong	35	History	63
Thursday 1st February 200 - Mekong Riveri.....	37	Origin of the name	63

Pha That Luang	65	Thursday 22nd March 2007 – Lang Son - Hua Shan.....	97
Thursday 8th March 2007 - Vientiane - Lak Sao	69	China - Ethnic Minorities	97
Friday 9th March 2007 - Lak Sao- Hanoi.....	71	Dong.....	97
Vietnam	71	Hui.....	97
Vietnam – History.....	71	Miao (Mong, Hmong).....	98
Vietnam – Geography	71	Yao.....	98
Hanoi	72	Zhuang	98
Saturday 10 th March 2007 - Hanoi	72	Friday 23rd March 2007 – Hua Shan - Liuzhou.....	99
Sunday 11 th March 2007 – Hanoi	75	Saturday 24th March 2007 – Liu Zhou - Chengyangu	101
Monday 12 th March 2007 – Hanoi.....	75	Dong Wind and Rain Bridge.....	102
Tuesday 13 th March 2007 – Hanoi.....	75	Sunday 25th March 2007 – Chengyang.....	104
Wednesday 14 th March 2007 – Hanoi.....	79	Monday 26th March 2007 – Chenyang – Lonji Rice Terraces.....	107
Thursday 15 th March 2007 - Hanoi.....	79	Dragon's Backbone Rice Terraces :	108
Friday 16 th March 2007 - Hanoi.....	80	Tuesday 27th March 2007 – Lonji.....	109
Saturday 17 th March 2007 - Hanoi	83	Wednesday 28th March 2007 – Zhuang Jie - Yangshuo	112
Phat Diem – amazing Catholic Church	84	Thursday 29th March 2007 - Yangshuo.....	114
Phat Diem Catholic Church	85	Friday 30th March 2007 - Yangshuo	116
Hanoi to Hong Kong	87	Green Lotus Peak (Bilian Peak) :	116
Sunday 18 th March 2007 – Hanoi	87	Story of the Calligraphy Word, Dai.	118
Monday 19 th March 2007 - Halong Bay	89	Saturday 31st March 2007 - Hong Kong.....	119
Tuesday 20 th March 2007 – Halong Bay.....	92	Web References – Bangkok to Beijing	120
Wednesday 21 st March 2007 – Halong Bay.....	94		

Itinerary

Laos, Hanoi, China – March – April - 2007

Part 1

Day	Date		Tour Day	Location	
1	24-Feb-07	Saturday		Melb - Bangkok	Grande Ville Hotel 903 Mahachai Road - Chinatown Bangkok - Thailand Phone: +66 (0) 2 225 0050 Fax: +66 (0) 2 225 7593
2	25-Feb-07	Sunday	1	Bangkok	Grande Ville Hotel
3	26-Feb-07	Monday	2	Bangkok	Grande Ville Hotel
4	27-Feb-07	Tuesday	3	Chiang Mai	
5	28-Feb-07	Wednesday	4	Chiang Khong	
6	1-Mar-07	Thursday	5	Mekong River	
7	2-Mar-07	Friday	6	Mekong River	
8	3-Mar-07	Saturday	7	Luang Prabang	
9	4-Mar-07	Sunday	8	Luang Prabang	
10	5-Mar-07	Monday	9	Vientiane	
11	6-Mar-07	Tuesday	10	Vientiane	
12	7-Mar-07	Wednesday	11	Vientiane	
13	8-Mar-07	Thursday	12	Lak Sao	
14	9-Mar-07	Friday	13	Hanoi	Victory Hotel 15 Nguyen Nhu Do St – Hanoi - Vietnam Phone: +84 4747 4725 Fax: +84 4747 0539
15	10-Mar-07	Saturday	14	Hanoi	Victory Hotel

16	11-Mar-07	Sunday	15	Hanoi	Que & Hans Villa 27, Ho Tay Villa complex Number 10, Dang Thai Mai, Tay Ho district, Hanoi Phone: 0902118825 (Que's mobile).
17	12-Mar-07	Monday		Hanoi	Que & Hans
18	13-Mar-07	Tuesday		Hanoi	Que & Hans
19	14-Mar-07	Wednesday		Hanoi	Que & Hans
20	15-Mar-07	Thursday		Hanoi	Que & Hans
21	16-Mar-07	Friday		Hanoi	Que & Hans
22	17-Mar-07	Saturday		Hanoi	Que & Hans
23	18-Mar-07	Sunday	1	Hanoi	Victory Hotel 15 Nguyen Nhu Do Street – Hanoi - Vietnam Phone: +84 4 7474725 Fax: +84 4 747053
24	19-Mar-07	Monday	2	Halong Bay	
25	20-Mar-07	Tuesday	3	Halong Bay	
26	21-Mar-07	Wednesday	4	Halong Bay	
27	22-Mar-07	Thursday	5	Hua Shan	
28	23-Mar-07	Friday	6	Liuzhou	
29	24-Mar-07	Saturday	7	Chengyang	
30	25-Mar-07	Sunday	8	Chengyang	
31	26-Mar-07	Monday	9	Longji	
32	27-Mar-07	Tuesday	10	Longji	
33	28-Mar-07	Wednesday	11	Yangshuo	
34	29-Mar-07	Thursday	12	Yangshuo	
35	30-Mar-07	Friday	13	Yangshuo	
36	31-Mar-07	Saturday	14	Hong Kong	West Hotel 39 Wai Ching Street – Yaumatei Kowloon - Hong Kong - China Phone: 852 2770 7718 Fax: 852 2770 7066

37	1-Apr-07	Sunday	15	Hong Kong	Stanford Hotel 118 Soy Street – Mongkok - Kowloon Hong Kong - China Phone: +852 2781 1881 Fax: +852 2388 3733
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Part 2

38	2-Apr-07	Monday	1	Hong Kong	Stanford Hotel
39	3-Apr-07	Tuesday	2	Hong Kong	Stanford Hotel
40	4-Apr-07	Wednesday	3	Yangshuo	
41	5-Apr-07	Thursday	4	Yangshuo	
42	6-Apr-07	Friday	5	Yangshuo	
43	7-Apr-07	Saturday	6	Yangzi River	
44	8-Apr-07	Sunday	7	Yangzi River	
45	9-Apr-07	Monday	8	Yangzi River	
46	10-Apr-07	Tuesday	9	Hangzhou	
47	11-Apr-07	Wednesday	10	Hangzhou	
48	12-Apr-07	Thursday	11	Huangshan	
49	13-Apr-07	Friday	12	Huangshan	
50	14-Apr-07	Saturday	13	Shanghai	
51	15-Apr-07	Sunday	14	Shanghai	
52	16-Apr-07	Monday	15	Zhouzhuang	
53	17-Apr-07	Tuesday	16	Zhouzhuang	
54	18-Apr-07	Wednesday	17	Suzhou	
55	19-Apr-07	Thursday	18	Xi'an	
56	20-Apr-07	Friday	19	Xi'an	
57	21-Apr-07	Saturday	20	Xi'an	
58	22-Apr-07	Sunday	21	Pingyao	
59	23-Apr-07	Monday	22	Pingyao	
60	24-Apr-07	Tuesday	23	Datong	

61	25-Apr-07	Wednesday	24	Datong	
					Dong Jiao Min Xiang Hotel 23A Dong Jiao Min Xiang Dong Cheng District – Beijing - China Phone: +8610 6524 3311 Fax: +86 10 6513 1402
62	26-Apr-07	Thursday	25	Beijing	
63	27-Apr-07	Friday	26	Beijing	Dong Jiao Min Xiang Hote
64	28-Apr-07	Saturday	27	Beijing	Dong Jiao Min Xiang Hote
65	29-Apr-07	Sunday	28	Beijing - Melbourne	

MAPS

Bangkok to Hanoi



Hanoi to Hong Kong



Hong Kong to Beijing



Bangkok to Hanoi

Saturday 24th February 2007 - Melbourne to Bangkok

Day 01

Despite a total of only 10 hours flying from Melbourne to Bangkok via Sydney it was over 18 hours from the time I left home until I was finally in the hotel in Bangkok. Apart from a few patches of turbulence the flight from Sydney to Bangkok in a full Boeing 747-400 was as cramped as usual.

<http://www.thaiembassy.jp/thailand/e-history.htm>

Note: This history omits WWII and the regular military coups in the last 60 years. The most recent being in September 2006.

Thailand's History

Early years



The Thais, most historians believe, began migrating from southern China in the early part of the Christian era. At

first they formed a number of city-states in the northern part of what is present-day Thailand, in places like Chiang Saen, Chiang Rai and Chiang Mai, but these

were never strong enough to exert much influence outside the immediate region. Gradually the Thais migrated further south to the broad and fertile central plains, and expanded their dominance over nearly the entire Indochina Peninsula. Contradictory as it may seem, however, recent archaeological discoveries around the northeast hamlet of Ban Chiang suggest that the world's oldest Bronze Age civilization was flourishing in Thailand some 5,000 years ago.

Sukhothai Period(1238-1438)

Sukhothai was the first Thai kingdom. It was founded in 1238 by two Thai governors, Khun Bang Klang Thao (Sri Inthrahit) and Khun Pha Muang who rebelled against the Khmers; and gave independence to the region. Sukhothai period was the most flourishing period of Thailand. It gained independence in 1238 and quickly expanded its boundary of influence. Sukhothai period was considered to be a golden age of Thai culture.



During that time in the history, everybody could say that "There are fish in the water and rice in the fields". The boundary of Sukhothai stretched from Lampang in the north to Vientiane, in present day Laos and the south to the Malay Peninsula. During this time Thai had strong friendship with neighboring countries. It absorbed elements of various civilizations which they came into contact. Thai maintained and advanced their culture with China. The potters entered Thai artistry and extensive trade was established with Cambodia and India.

After the death of Khun Pha Muang in 1279, Ramkhamhaeng King, the third son of Si Inthrahit, ascended to the throne. Under the Ramkhamhaeng King, Sukhothai had strong friendship with neighbouring China. Ramkhamhaeng King organized a writing system which became the basis for writing and eventually developed to be the modern Thai alphabet.

Ayutthaya Period(1351-1767)

Ayutthaya, the capital of the Thai Kingdom was found by U-Thong King in 1350. Ayutthaya as an island is formed by the gathering of three rivers, the Chao Phraya, the Pasak, and the Loburi and surrounded by rice terraces. It is easy to see why the Ayutthaya area was settled

prior to this date since the site offered a variety of geographical and economic advantages. The Thai kings of Ayutthaya became powerful in the 14th and 15th centuries, taking over U-Thong, Lopburi, and Ayutthaya.

King U-Thong and his immediate successors expanded



Ayutthaya's territory, especially northward towards Sukhothai and eastward towards the Khmer capital of Angkor. The greater size of government

could not remain the same as during the days of King Ramkhamhaeng. The society during the Ayutthaya period was strictly hierarchical. There were, roughly, three classes of people king at the top of scale. At the bottom of social scale were commoners and the slaves.



In the early 16th century, the European visited Ayutthaya, and a Portuguese embassy was established in 1511.

Portugal's powerful neighbor Spain was the next European nation to arrive in Ayutthaya forward the end of the 16th century. In he early 17th century they saw the arrival of two northern European, the Dutch and the British, and France in 1662.

In the mid-16th century, Ayutthaya and the independent kingdom in Chiang Mai was put under the control of the Burmese, but Thais could regain both of the capitals by the end of the century.

The Burmese invaded Ayutthaya again in 1765. This time Burmese caused much fear to Thais. Burmese soldiers destroyed everything, including temples, manuscripts, and religious sculpture. After the capital fell



in their hands for two years, the

Burmese

effectiveness could not further hold the kingdom. Phaya

Taksin, a Thai

general, promoted himself to be the king in 1769. He ruled the new capital of Thonburi on the bank of Chao Phraya River, opposite Bangkok. Thais regained control of their country and thus scattered themselves to the provinces in the north and central part of Thailand. Taksin eventually turn himself to be the next Buddha and was dismissed and executed by his ministers who did not approve his religious values.

Thonburi Period(1767-1782)

After the fall of Ayudthaya, General Taksin, a general of Ayudthaya, drafted an army of patriots to take revenge for his country. He successfully chased away the Burmese troops. After the Burmese were gone, he decided to

build a new capital along the Chaopraya river and named it "Thonburi".

King Taksin has reined a peaceful country for over



15 years and extended diplomatic relationship with many countries from overseas including China. Unfortunately, King Taksin, who devoted his life to protect his beloved country, was over stressed from the wars and eventually became insane. Thonburi was collapsed because of the coup in 1782 by General Chakri. King Taksin's achievements have caused prosperity to bestow on him the epithet "the Great"

Rattanakosin Period (1782-Present)

After Taksin's death, General Chakri became the first king of the Chakri dynasty, Rama I, ruling from 1782 to 1809. His first action as king was to transfer the royal capital across the river from Thonburi to Bangkok and build the Grand Palace. Rama II (1809-1824) continued the restoration begun by his predecessor.

King Nang Klao, Rama III (1824-1851) reopened relations with western nations and developed trade with China. King Mongkut, Rama IV, (1851-1868) of "The

King and I" concluded treaties with European countries, avoided colonialization and established modern Thailand. He made many social and economic reforms during his reign.



King Chulalongkorn, Rama V (1869-1910) continued his father's tradition

of reform, abolishing slavery and improving the public welfare and administrative system. Compulsory education and other educational reforms were introduced by King Vajiravudh, Rama VI (1910-1925). During the reign of King Prajadhipok, (1925-1935), Thailand changed from an absolute monarchy to a constitutional monarchy. The king abdicated in 1933 and was succeeded by his nephew, King Ananda Mahidol (1935-1946). The country's name was changed from Siam to Thailand with the advent of democratic government in 1939.

From absolute monarchy to constitutional monarchy

The politics of Thailand took some significant turn on 24 June 1932 when a group of young intellectuals, educated abroad and imbued with the concept of Western democracy, staged a bloodless coup, demanding a change from absolute to a constitutional monarchy. Determined to avoid any bloodshed, His Majesty King Prajadhipok (Rama VII) agreed to the abolition of absolute monarchy and the transfer of power to the constitution-based system of government as demanded.



To some, this demand was premature, but fortunately with the far-sightedness of King Prajadhipok and his predecessors in particular King Chulalongkorn the Great (Rama V) and King Vajiravudh (Rama VI), Thailand was not unprepared for this transition. While continuing the process launched by the two previous kings, King Prajadhipok had every intention of accustoming the Thais to the Western

system of constitutional monarchy and had considered the eventuality of altering such form of government to the people at an appropriate moment. Popular readiness, the King believed, was an important Ingredient to success for such transition. It was only a matter of waiting for the right time.

On 10 December 1932, His Majesty King Prajadhipok signed Thailand first constitution and thus ended 700 years of Thailand absolute monarchy. Despite the number of successive constitutions that followed in the span of just over half a century, the basic concepts of constitutional government and monarchy laid down in the 1932 constitution have remained unaltered.

<http://www.csmngt.com/thailand1.htm>

http://www.csmngt.com/thailand_history.htm

<http://www.amazing-thailand.com/History.html>

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_Thailand

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Economy_of_Thailand

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Geography_of_Thailand

Sunday 25th February 2007 - Bangkok

Day 02

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bangkok>

http://www.bma.go.th/bmaeng/body_general.html

<http://203.155.220.239/en/02thebma/GEOGRAPHY%20OF%20BANGKOK.php>

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Category:Geography_of_Bangkok

http://www.thaiwaysmagazine.com/bangkok/bangkok_history.html



Prison Tower - Romaneenart Park - Bangkok

http://www.asianinfo.org/asianinfo/bangkok/history_of_bangkok.htm

History of Bangkok



Shrine - Romaneenart Park - Bangkok



Loha Prasat (Metal Castle) - Wat Ratchanadda - Bangkok

After Ayutthaya was burned by the Burmese army in 1767, the Thai army established Thonburi, a community of Bangkok as the new capital. Bangkok was instituted as the new capital in 1782 by king Chakri, also known by his dynastic name Rama I.



Wat Intharawihan - Bangkok



Lucky Buddha - Bangkok

After asking Chinese merchants to move to the Sampeng area, Rama I used the vacated land to build the Temple of the Emerald Buddha (Wat Phra Kaew). Another thing he did was to give Bangkok a royal name, one that happened to include the title Krung Thep ("City of Angels"), which was what Ayutthaya had been called.



Wat Ratchanadda - Bangkok

After being expelled from Thailand in 1688, foreigners started sprinkling into Bangkok. Initially, there were a few merchants and missionaries in the 1830's, and by 1860 many European countries and North America had trade treaties with Bangkok.

The King and I, a movie based on King Mongkut, is still banned in Thailand today since many feel it is not an accurate portrayal of him. King Mongkut (1851-1868), and later on his son King Chulalongkorn (1868-1910) is responsible

for the modernization that has taken place in Thailand. The city's first paved street was built under his rule and in 1863, his son sustained it by building more city roads, constructing a rail line to go north as well as adding a tram line.



Marble Temple - Wat Benjamabophit - Bangkok



Bridge - Marble Temple - Wat Benjamabophit - Bangkok



Drums - Marble Temple - Wat Benjamabophit - Bangkok



Courtyard and Cloisters - Marble Temple - Wat Benjamabophit - Bangkok



Loha Prasat (Metal Castle) - Wat Ratchanadda - Bangkok



Loha Prasat (Metal Castle) - Wat Ratchanadda - Bangkok



Standing Buddha - Wat Intharawihan - Bangkok



Wat Intharawihan - Bangkok

With the turn of the 20th century, Bangkok began growing even more, with former rural market areas turning into residential areas. In an effort to promote growth and development in Thonburi, Memorial Bridge was constructed in 1932 to connect it to Bangkok. Other efforts at modernization included filling in canals to make more land area and roadways.

The Vietnam War really brought about growth in Thailand with all the money that streamed in and improvements were made to existing problems, such as widening the road to the Don Muang airport. World War II and Thailand's "alliance" with Japan caused problems particularly toward the end of the war with Bangkok being bombed by the Allies.

Increased population and modernization from the 1960s on have caused some problems in Bangkok. The housing situation is deplorable as there are over 8 million people in Bangkok and a direct result of the population and modernization explosion is

a problem with severe traffic congestion. Some may feel that the loss of many cultural sections of Bangkok is a high price to pay in the name of modernization, especially since these areas with their markets and inhabitants have disappeared to make way for shopping centres. Bangkok is now most other modern cities in the world

As today is a free day until the group assembles at 18:00 I set out to explore the neighbourhood of the hotel at about 09:00. The streets are starting to become busy, but nothing like it becomes later in the day.

I set out along Mahachai Road towards a large park, Romaneenart Park that I can see from the hotel window.



Head of the Reclining Buddha - Wat Pho - Bangkok

The park was once the site of the Bangkok Corrections Centre and the Corrections Museum is located in the park. There are remains of the prison walls and throughout the park there is a variety of pieces exercise equipment for the people to use and to keep fit. After the prison was closed

the area was converted to a park and given to the Queen for her 60th birthday.

<http://www.corkscrew-balloon.com/misc/prison/index.html>



Reclining Buddha - Wat Pho - Bangkok



Feet of the Reclining Buddha - Wat Pho - Bangkok

After walking around the park for a while I continued on my way along Manachai Road to Wat Theptidaram and then to Wat

Ratchanadda and the Loha Prasat (Metal Castle). A feature of this temple is the intricate cast iron towers that surround the building.

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wat_Ratchanadda

<http://www.geocities.com/RainForest/7153/watratda.htm>

The [pagoda](#) is a replica of the Loha Prasat built in [India](#). It is 36 m high and has 37 metal spires, signifying the 37 virtues toward enlightenment.

Visitors can climb the inside of the building and get a closer view of the towers and the polished iron components.



Mahakan Fort - Bangkok

On the opposite side of the road are remnants of the city parapets and Mahakan Fort, a small octagonal fortress overlooking one of Bangkok' s major intersections.



Wat Pho - Bangkok

<http://www.geocities.com/RainForest/7153/pommhkan.htm>

Bangkok was originally moated and walled with forts at intervals along it. The moat was formed by a canal dug at a distance of about two kilometres from [the Royal Palace](#), leaving the river to the north of the city and rejoining it to the south. It is 7.2 kilometres long, and it is today called Klong Bang Lamphu and Klong Ong Ang. Strong and solid walls were constructed along the inner side of this

canal, being 3.6 metres high and 2.7 metres thick, broken by 16 gates and 14 forts (Phra Sumain, Yukornton, Mahaprab, Mahakan, Mootaluog, Seurtayan, Mahachai, charkphet, Phisua, Mahaluok, Mahayak, Phrachun, Phra-Ar-thit, and Isintorn), two of which now remain as historic monuments on the 200 metres, remaining of the wall, namely, [Fort Mahakan](#) and [Fort Phrasumain](#).



Klong near Mahakan Fort - Bangkok

There are not yet many people about and as I stop to take some more photos of Loha Prasat and the surrounding temple buildings a man passes the time of day and after exchanging the usual pleasantries he tells me that today is a special Buddhist Festival day and that the temples are free and that this is the only day in the year the Temple of the Lucky Buddha is open to foreign visitors. Furthermore a government promotion is enabling tuk-tuks to carry passengers for up to two hours for 20baht (\$A0.8). While we are talking he makes out a list of places I should see and when a tuk-tuk pulls up nearby he

bundles me into and I am off into the thickening traffic. It is difficult to see much from the tuk-tuk as I am too tall, however we are soon at our first stop, the 32m high standing Buddha at Wat Intharawihan. The locals don't seem much impressed by it but there are a few taking photos and there are preparations under way for festivities later in the day.

<http://www.thailandguidebook.com/indravihan.html>

Wat Intharawihan (sometimes spelled Wat Indravihan) is located on Wisut Kasat Road on the northern edge of Banglamphu. This temple is known for a huge standing Buddha image called Luang Pho To. The image, 32 metres tall and 10 metres wide, was constructed in the reign of King Rama IV.

There is, however, much more activity in the temple grounds, as stalls are being set up and people worshipping or picnicking.

The Temple of the Lucky Buddha is quite small and there are many images, of different sizes of the same Buddha. Most are black timber with some gold leaf. I am told that a small Buddha at the front dates from the time of Rama II and is about 300 years old. This is an unusually untidy temple and hidden away among modern bits and pieces are two fine Chinese vases, about a metre tall.



**Wrapping Buddha Image in Gold Cloth
- Golden Mount - Bangkok**

Its time to pay for this very cheap tuk-tuk ride! In the name of trade promotion the government has issued fuel vouchers to be given to tuk-tuk drivers who bring clients to shops selling jewellery, clothing and other locally made products. Our next stop is Pan-Siamese Gems! I am not interested in gems, although they had some very nice pieces of jewellery on display. They did have some hand painted porcelain that I thought quite good and so I purchased a small piece.

The driver had his fuel voucher and so we could head for the Marble Temple.

<http://www.sacred-destinations.com/thailand/bangkok-wat-benjamabophit-marble-temple.htm>

Wat Benjamabophit (also spelled Wat Benchamabophit) is called the Marble Temple because of the white Carrara marble of which it's constructed. The Marble Temple is the most modern and one of the most beautiful of Bangkok's royal wats.

The Marble Temple was built in 1899 by Prince Narai, the half brother of Rama V. Thailand's present king spent his days as a monk here before his coronation. Today, Marble Temple is not only a magnificent Thai temple, but also a seat of learning that appeals to Buddhist monks with intellectual yearnings.

This is quite unusual as it is constructed of marble and has a large courtyard surrounded by cloisters with many Buddha images that appear to have been collected from different parts of the country. The cloisters were crowded with people eating their lunch.

Before we can visit the Reclining Buddha at Wat Pho we have to make another trade promotion stop, this time at James Fashion International, a silk and custom tailoring business. As I have been having considerable difficulty finding the sort of shirts I want for travelling I ordered some very light pure cotton ones. We'll see how they go.

<http://www.watpho.com/>

<http://www.into-asia.com/bangkok/attractions/watpho.php>

http://www.watpho.com/massage_e.html



Bells - Golden Mount - Bangkok

The huge reclining Buddha is a tourist attraction and the temple was fairly crowded. The building it is in has many columns and a view of the whole figure can only be obtained from the head or the foot. This makes it very difficult to get a photo that does not distort the image severely.

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wat_Ph

Wat Pho

Wat Pho (Thai: วัดโพธิ์), also known as Wat Phra Chetuphon วัดพระเชตุพน) or The Temple of the Reclining Buddha, is a [Buddhist](#) temple in [Bangkok](#), [Thailand](#).

Its official name is Wat Phra Chetuphon Vimolmangklararm Rajwaramahaviharn (Thai วัดพระเชตุพนวิมลมังคลารามราชวรมหาวิหาร). The temple was created as a restoration of an earlier temple on the same site, Wat Phodharam, the work beginning in 1788. The temple was restored and extended in the reign of King Rama III, and was restored again in 1982.



Stupa - Golden Mount - Bangkok

Wat Pho is the largest and oldest [wat](#) in Bangkok (with an area of 50 rai, 80,000 square metres), and is home to more than one thousand [Buddha images](#), more than any other temple in the country, as well as the largest single Buddha image: the Reclining Buddha (Phra Buddhasaiyas, Thai พระพุทธไสยาสน์). Made as part of Rama III's restoration, the Reclining Buddha is forty-six metres long and fifteen metres high, decorated with gold plating on its body and [mother of pearl](#) on its eyes and the soles of its feet. The latter display 108 auspicious scenes in [Chinese](#) and [Indian](#) styles.

The temple is also known as the birthplace of traditional [Thai massage](#). Even prior to the temple's founding, the site was a centre of education for traditional Thai medicine, and statues were created showing [yoga](#) positions. During the Rama III restoration plaques inscribed with medical texts were placed around the temple, while in 1962 a school for traditional medicine and massage was established.

The Wat Pho complex consists of two walled compounds, bisected by Soi Chetuphon running east-west. The northern walled compound is where the reclining Buddha and massage school are found. The southern walled compound, *Tukgawee*, is a working Buddhist monastery with monks in residence and a school.

One more trade stop and then I am dropped off near where I was picked up three hours before.

Nearby is the Golden Mount, a man made hill at the top of which is a temple. Construction was started by Rama III and

before the days of high-rise buildings in Bangkok it would have dominated a city built on a very flat flood plane.



View from Golden Mount - Bangkok

<http://thailandforvisitors.com/central/bangkok/goldmnt.html>

The Golden Mount is part of the Wat Saket temple located just outside the old royal city precincts, next to the Pom Mahakhan fort. The mount has a somewhat unusual history. It was started by King Rama III early in the 19th century, who wanted to build a large chedi on the site to mark the entrance to the city. However, the soft marshy ground could not support such a large structure and it collapsed before it was completed.

Later on, Rama IV built a small chedi housing a Buddha relic on top of the mud and brick mound. The chedi was rebuilt again towards the end of the 19th century by his son Rama V when the Viceroy of India, Lord Curzon, made a gift of a Buddha relic excavated from the town where Buddha was believed to have

been born. The concrete cap was built during WW II to keep the artificial hill from eroding further

After making my way to the top of the Mount I returned to Manachai Road. I can see the Great Swing, a very tall Tora like structure in the distance and decide not to walk closer. It is now very hot and I am getting a little footsore so I make my way back to the hotel.

The Great Swing is situated in the grounds of Wat Sutat.

<http://www.bangkok.com/attraction-temple/wat-sutat.html>

One of the oldest temples with a sweeping elegant roof and the site of the original Giant Swing ceremony. A huge teak arch -

all that remains of the original Giant Swing - lies in the grounds in front of the temple.



Golden Mount from Hotel Window - Bangkok

The swing was used in a ceremony to give thanks for a good rice harvest. Young men would ride the swing high in the air, suspended 80 feet from the ground when in full swing, and try to grab a bag of silver coins with their teeth. Some fairly severe injuries and a few deaths led to the dangerous swing ceremony's discontinuation after 1932, but the thanksgiving

ceremony is still celebrated in mid-December after the rice harvest.

For someone else's impression of a similar day in Bangkok see:

<http://www.maddogproductions.com/bangkok.htm>



Golden Mount at Night from Hotel Window - Bangkok

Monday 26th February 2007 - Bangkok

Day 03

At 09:00 we leave the hotel for a 10-15 minute walk through Chinatown to the banks of the Chao Phraya river where we board a long tail boat to explore the khlongs on the other side of the river from modern Bangkok. The capital was

established here at Thonburi but was soon moved to the present site when the king realised that the site was unsuitable for a capital. It was difficult to defend and subject to flooding. Levy banks and locks now control the water level and prevent flooding of the houses and factories.

My recollection of my previous visit to the khlongs about 20 years ago was of a series of putrid filthy waterways in which people bathed and everything else. This time the khlongs were almost free of litter and there seemed less evidence of people using the khlongs as bathrooms and laundries. Perhaps they were different khlongs and these were the tourist khlongs.



Shrine - Khlongs - Bangkok

This tour was somewhat disappointing as from my position at the bow of the boat I was unable to hear any commentary and apart from a stop to feed frenzied fish with bread we seem to be racing through the khlongs without having an opportunity to appreciate some of the sights. The following describes some of the major attractions of Thonburi:

<http://www.into-asia.com/bangkok/districts/thonburi.php>



Beside the Chao Phraya River - Bangkok



Beside the Chao Phraya River - Bangkok

On our return to Bangkok we landed near Wat Pho and this time our leader guided us through some of the main buildings of the Temple.

Wat Pho is a first class royal temple and many members of the Royal Family are buried in the grounds. The building where Thai kings are crowned is situated in the Temple grounds.



Beside the Chao Phraya River - Bangkok



Entrance Locks to the Khlongs - Bangkok

Nearby is the Grand Palace that is surrounded by a wall nearly 2 km long. The highlights of the Palace are the Temple of the

Emerald Buddha and the Grand Palace itself. The Buddha was thought to be a large emerald when the gold leaf and plaster was partially removed to reveal a green stone. It is in fact jade, but has continued to be known as the Emerald Buddha. The Palace is spectacular, but the public is not admitted.



Detail - Mother of Pearl - Feet of the Reclining Buddha - Wat Pho - Bangkok

<http://thailandforvisitors.com/central/bangkok/ratanakosin/prakeo/>



Khlong Dwelling - Bangkok



Fish feeding frenzy - Khlongs - Bangkok

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Grand_Palace,_Bangkok

The Grand Palace ([Thai](#): พระบรมมหาราชวัง, *Phra Borom Maha Ratcha Wang*) is a complex of buildings in [Bangkok](#), [Thailand](#). It served as the official residence of the king of Thailand from the [18th century](#) to the mid-[20th century](#). After

the death of King [Ananda Mahidol](#) in the Baromphiman Palace, King [Bhumibol](#) moved the official royal residence to [Chitralada Palace](#). Construction of the palace complex began in 1782, during the reign of [Rama I](#).



Modern Khlong Dwelling - Bangkok



Traders on the Khlongs - Bangkok



Serena and Paulette - Donating - Reclining Buddha - Wat Pho - Bangkok

The palace complex sits on the east bank of the [Chao Phraya River](#). The other approaches to the palace are protected by a defensive wall of 1,900 metres in length, which encloses an area of 218,400 square metres. Further out from the wall is a [canal](#), which was also created for defensive purposes, making the area surrounding the palace an island, known as Rattana Kosin.



Older, timber house - Khlongs - Bangkok



Chao Phraya River - Bangkok

<http://www.into-asia.com/bangkok/attractions/watphrakaew.php>

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wat_Phra_Kaew

The Wat Phra Kaew ([English](#) Temple of the Emerald Buddha, [Thai](#): วัดพระแก้ว; full official name Wat Phra Sri

Rattana Satsadaram, [Thai](#): วัดพระศรีรัตนศาสดาราม) is regarded as the most important [Buddhist](#) temple in [Thailand](#). It is located in the historic center of [Bangkok](#) (district [Phra Nakhon](#)), within the grounds of the [Grand Palace](#).



Memorial Stupas - Wat Pho - Bangkok



Anatomical Drawing - Wat Pho - Bangkok



Wat Pho - Bangkok



Marble Stupa - Wat Pho - Bangkok



Wat Phra Kaew - Bangkok



Wat Phra Kaew - Bangkok

The construction of the temple started when King [Buddha Yodfa Chulaloke](#) (Rama I) moved the capital from [Thonburi](#) to Bangkok in [1785](#). Unlike other temples it does not contain living quarters for monks; rather, it has only the highly decorated holy buildings, statues, and pagodas.

The main building is the central *ubosoth*, which houses the [Emerald Buddha](#). Even though it is small in size it is the most important icon for Thai people. Legends hold that the statue originated in [India](#), but it first surfaced in

the vassal Kingdom of Cambodia and was given as a gift to the King of Ayuttaya in the 15th century [1434](#).

The image disappeared when Burmese raiders sacked Ayuttaya and the image was feared lost. A century later, the 'Emerald' Buddha reappeared in Chiang Saen, after a rainstorm washed away some of its plaster covering. It was then moved to [Chiang Rai](#), then Chiang Mai, where it was removed by prince Setatiratt to Luang Prabang, when his father died and he ascended the throne of that Siamese vassal state. In later years it was moved to the

Siamese vassal state of Vientiane. During a Haw invasion from the North, Luang Prabang requested Siam's help in repelling the invaders. The King of Vientiane traitorously attacked the Siamese army from the rear, so the 'Emerald' Buddha returned to Siam when King [Taksin](#) fought with [Laos](#) and his general Chakri (the later King [Rama I](#)) took it from [Vientiane](#), which at that time had been brought to its knees by the Thai Army. It was first taken to [Thonburi](#) and in [1784](#) it was moved to its current location. Wat Preah Keo, in Phnom Penh, is considered by many modern [Cambodians](#) as its rightful

resting place, whereas, [Haw Phra Kaew](#), in Vientiane, is considered by many [Lao people](#) as the Emerald Buddha's rightful place.



Walls of the Grand Palace - Bangkok



Illustration on the Cloister Wall - Wat Phra Kaew - Bangkok

The wall surrounding the temple area – from the outside only a plain white wall – is painted with scenes

from the Thai version of the [Ramayana](#) mythology, the [Ramakian](#). Several statues in the temple area resemble figures from this story, most notably the giants (*yak*), five-meter high statues. Also originating from the Ramayana are the monkey kings and giants which surround the golden chedis.

The Temple also contains a model of [Angkor Wat](#), added by King [Nangklao](#) (Rama III), as the [Khmer empire](#) of [Cambodia](#) and the Thais share cultural and religious roots.



Wat Phra Kaew - Bangkok

By now it is 35C and extremely humid and most uncomfortable out in the sun so I head back to the hotel, arriving about 13:30.

In the late afternoon we travel by taxi to the train station where we board our comfortable overnight train for Chiang Mai (approximately 13 hours). Our baggage

travels in the carriage with us and there is a food and drink service available on board.

By comparison with Myanmar and even India the sleeping cars are luxurious and the track is good. So the 13½ hour journey is comfortable and without incident.



Wat Phra Kaew - Bangkok



Grand Palace - Bangkok



Tourist Quarter - Old Chiang Mai

On arrival at Chiang Mai station we proceed straight to the People Palace Hotel reasonably close to the old city of Chang Mai.

This historic city was the capital of the region in the 14th C and there are several Wats (Temples) dating from that time.



Chedi - Wat Umongmahatatherchan - Chiang Mai

In the 12th century, Phaya Mangrai, a capable ruler from Muang Hiran Ngoen Yang, united many of these smaller communities and established a larger domain which became known as Yonok. He expanded the territory to include the Ping River basin and called it Khwaen Ping. Wanting a new administrative centre for his domain, he founded Chiang Mai - the 'new capital' of the kingdom he called Lanna.



Wat Chiang Man - Chiang Mai

Through many changes that brought periods of prosperity and hardship this ancient city has become the Chiang Mai that we know today. Though modern Chiang Mai no longer controls a kingdom, it has not lost its importance or charm. Endowed with natural resources, magnificent scenery and a vivid local culture, the city has become a centre of tourism as well as a centre of regional importance in education, industry, communication, commerce and service.



Wat Phra Sing - Chiang Mai

<http://www.yupparaj.ac.th/webpage/computer/student/topic10/engintro.html>

http://www.chiangmai1.com/chiang_mai/history.shtml

<http://www.chiangmai-guideline.com/information/info-history.htm>
<http://www.thaifocus.com/history.htm>
http://www.thailand.com/travel/historical/historical_chiangmai.htm



Wat Phra Sing - Chiang Mai



Katam Corner - Walls of Old Chiang Mai



Wat Chiang Man - Chiang Mai

As today is free until the afternoon some have chosen to go elephant riding and rafting and others and I have decided to explore the old city and set out on foot.

Our first stop is a coffee break and then we plunge into the small streets of the Old City where we make our first stop at a store selling traditional arts and crafts from the hill tribes.

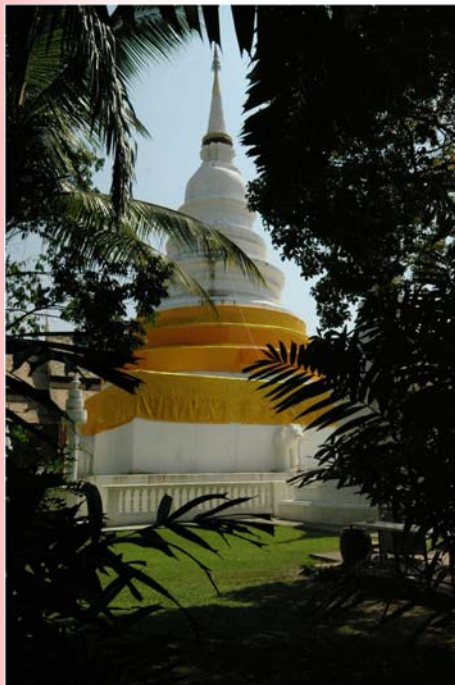


Illustrations on the Temple Wall - Wat Chiang Man - Chiang Mai



Ancient Buddha Images covered during renovations - Wat Chiang Man - Chiang Mai

We wander into an area filled with small hotels and restaurants; obviously a location for backpackers and other low budget travellers.



Chedi - Wat Phra Sing - Chiang Mai

We are heading for Wat Chiang Man, the oldest Royal Wat in Chiang Mai, and on the way we enter Wat Umongmahatatherchan and have a look around.

Apart from the city walls and the four gates, when work on the new city began,

Phaya Mangrai also constructed a palace at Ban Chiang Man which was known as Wiang Lek. Once the city had been built, Phaya Mangrai moved into a palace in the city and the original palace was turned into a monastery called Wat Chiang Man. Wat Chiang Man is thus recognised as the first monastery constructed in Chiang Mai.

<http://www.yupparaj.ac.th/webpage/computer/student/topic10/cmeng03.html>



Elephant Chedi - Wat Chiang Man - Chiang Mai

Finally we reach Wat Chiang Man.

<http://thailandforvisitors.com/north/chiangmai/chiengman/index.html>

Located within the walls of the old city, near the Chang Puak gate, Chiang Man is the oldest temple in Chiang Mai. It was supposedly built by the founder of the city 700 years ago, King

Mengrai. It's a small temple, and not on the main tourist trail, but it was important for quite some time.



Wat Chedi Luang - Chiang Mai



Reclining Buddha - Wat Chedi Luang - Chiang Mai

Several small buildings dot the temple compound, and behind the main [ubosot](#) is a [chedi](#). The base of the chedi is lined with elephants crafted out of plaster. All the other buildings are finely

decorated in the Northern style, with red lacquer, gold leaf and many-colored mirrors. Of special interest is the roof and stairs of the [Wiharn](#) which houses the sacred Buddha images. The stair banisters are colorful *naga* dragons typical of the North. The roof gable-ends also forms beautiful *nagas* using coloured glass and mirror tiles.



Wat Suan Dok - Chiang Mai

There are two images housed in the *wiharn* to the right of the main *ubosot*. The *wiharn* itself appears to have been

constructed around a sort of traditional Northern-style *prang* which houses the images. One image is a marble bas-relief Buddha supposed to have come from Sri Lanka 2,000 years ago. The second image is a crystal Buddha from Lopburi, and is thought to be about 1,800 years old.



Wat Phra Sing - Chiang Mai



Wat Phra Sing - Chiang Mai



Novice Monks - Wat Phra Sing - Chiang Mai



Wat Suan Dok - Chiang Mai

Unfortunately the very old Buddhas for which the Wat is famous were all wrapped up as the temple was being renovated.

By the time we had completed our inspection of Wat Chiang Man it was 11:30 and very hot.



Wat Chet Yot - Chiang Mai

The others felt it too hot to continue walking and I agreed. They chose to return to the hotel for a rest and lunch, but I decided to take up a taxi driver's offer to take me to the other significant Wats in the Old City and then to other important Wats outside the Old City. As usual the low fare was offset by obligatory visits to various factories so that the driver could collect a fuel voucher.

During the afternoon I visited:



Wat Suan Dok - Chiang Mai

Wat Chedi Luang

Wat Chedi Luang was established by King Saenmuangma of Cheingmai around about the middle of the 14th C. He had a large lanna style chedi called Rajakura or Chedi Luang constructed as a memorial to his father, King Kuna. The base of the chedi was twenty four metres wide and the height of the chedi was fourteen metres.

In the reign of King Thoka the chedi was enlarged to 54 metres wide and 86 metres high. The central part housed relics of Buddha brought from Sri Lanka. The Emerald Buddha was brought from Lampang and installed in the eastern niche of the chedi.

http://www.thailand.com/travel/historical/historical_chiangmai_watchediluang.htm

Unfortunately, the centrepiece chedi, which stands over 80 m high, is in partial ruins. The damage was either caused following a severe earthquake that occurred in 1545, or by canon fire from King Taksin, during the recapture of Chiang Mai from the Burmese in 1775.

In 1475 Wat Chedi Luang housed the revered Emerald Buddha image. The image is now enshrined in Bangkok's Wat Phra Kaeo. One of Wat Chedi Luang's most striking architectural features is a magnificent Naga staircase that adorns the chapel's front porch.

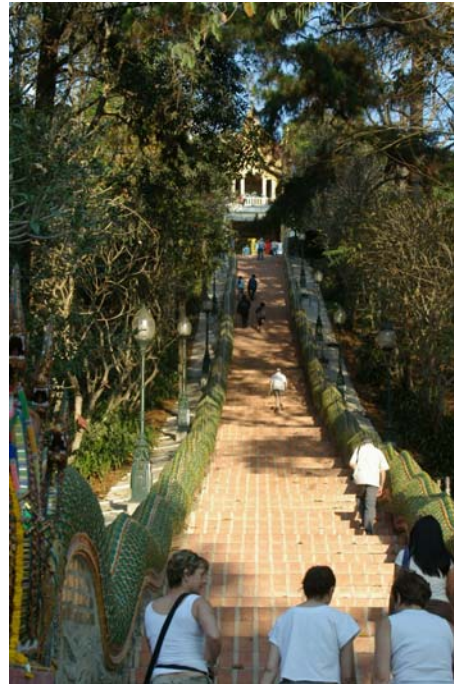
In 1995, UNESCO and the Japanese government financed the restoration of the main chedi and other parts of the wat complex.



Wat Chet Yot - Chiang Mai



Phra Chedi containing the ashes of King Ti-Logafaja - Wat Chet Yot - Chiang Mai



309 steps to Wat Phra That Doi Suthep - Chiang Mai



Wat Phra That Doi Suthep - Chiang Mai



Wat Phra That Doi Suthep - Chiang Mai

Wat Phra Sing

<http://thailandforvisitors.com/north/chiangmai/prasing/index.html>

http://www.thailand.com/travel/historical/historical_chiangmai_watprasing.htm

Wat Phra Sing is situated at the junction of Sam Lan and Singharat Roads in the heart of Chiang Mai city. The original wat chedi was built in the fourteenth century (circ. 1337-55) by King Pha Yu and was named Wat Li Chiang Phra. However, all of the buildings remaining today date from the early nineteenth century. Much of the restoration work was only recently carried out.

The wat is one of the focal points of the Songkran festivities each year from 13th - 15th April when people bathe the revered Phra Phutthasihing Buddha image. The senior abbot in Chiang Mai also resides at Wat Phra Singh and many other important Buddhist ceremonies take place here.

The wat is well known for its fine examples of Lanna art. The wat compound includes the lovely Lai Kham chapel with its exquisite wooden carvings and northern-style murals. There is also a magnificent scriptural repository with striking bas-relief, where holy texts written into folding books made of 'bai lan' or 'sa paper' have been carefully preserved - these are a true gem of Lanna art. The rear wihan has some beautiful murals depicting scenes from every-day life set in the Lanna Kingdom hundreds of years ago. There is also a copy of the Phra Sihing Buddha Image housed here.

Wat Suan Dok

http://www.thailand.com/travel/historical/historical_chiangmai_watsuandok.htm

The Wat Suan Dok is located on Suthep Road in the old royal flower garden or 'suan dok', situated just outside the old city walls. It was built in the early 14th century (circ.1371-83), to house a very holy Buddhist relic brought from Sukhothai. The legend says that on the relics arrival it miraculously split in two - half was kept at Wat Suan Dok and the other half was

buried at Wat Phrathat on Doi Suthep Mountain.

The main open wihan was rebuilt in 1932 by Khru Ba Siwichai and contains several important Buddha images. The bot contains some fine murals as well as a 500 year old bronze Buddha statue, which at over 4.7m high, is believed to be one of Thailand's largest metal images.

In 1909, Princess Dararasami, a Chiang Mai Princess and Consort of King Rama V, decreed that the ashes of all the Chiang Mai royal family should be interred in the wat's small white chedi.

The extensive grounds contain the campus of a Buddhist University. The wat complex is also a favourite spot for photographers, particularly during sunset.



Image of the Sacred White Elephant - Wat Phra That Doi Suthep - Chiang Mai



View of Chiang Mai from Doi Suthep

And Wat Chet Yot, with its crumbling Indian style temple and chedi from the 14th C, where there are many ruins of ancient stupas and chedis. The main chedi is similar in style to those I have seen in India and Myanmar. One large chedi, built in 1487 is in good condition, and houses the ashes of King Ti-Logoraja.

http://www.thailand.com/travel/historical/historical_chiangmai_watjedyard.htm

The Wat dates from 1455 and was built by King Tilokarat after he sent Lanna architects to study at Bodhgaya - the site of the Buddha's Enlightenment in north India over 2,500 years ago. The resulting design is very much of Indian influence. In fact it is thought that the wat was heavily influenced by the design of the Mahabodhi temple in Pagan, which itself was an exact copy of the Indian temple at Bodhgaya.

As the Wat's name (in Thai) suggests, there are seven square chedi within the complex. These stand on top of the old vihan in which there is an arched cave containing a Buddha image. The most interesting feature of the wat is the series of over seventy, much damaged, but still very beautiful, stucco celestial beings that decorate the walls of the base. Their intricate clothes and jewellery and their lovely smiling faces are Lanna art at its finest.

There are a further three chedi that stand in the spacious complex grounds - the largest contains King Tilokarat's remains. There is also a fine carved wood gable on the small bot that is situated nearby. The grounds of the temple are tranquil and spacious, shaded by many old trees.

In 1477 Wat Chet Yot hosted the Eighth World Buddhist council, which was convened to revise the "Tripitaka" (Buddhist canon and teachings) - the results of the conference have unfortunately been lost.

At Bo Sang there are many manufactures of Thai handicrafts; jewellery, lacquer ware, silver ware, clothing and antique

dealers. We visited several, each of whom had excellent wares on display, however I managed to limit myself to the purchase of a very small lacquer box.

As we are returning to the hotel there is one last stop, at a carpet warehouse where I was shown some very beautiful silk, hand woven Kashmir carpets. Very tempting! I did not succumb.



Wat Phra That Doi Suthep - Chiang Mai

We end our sight seeing day with visit to Wat Phra Sat Doi Suthep, high on Mount Doi Suthep overlooking Chiang Mai. To reach the temple itself requires a climb up a naga staircase of 309 steps.

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wat_Phathat_Doi_Suthep

We were not offered the option of taking the funicular cable car. We have come to in the late afternoon to enjoy the view and to witness the monks at evening prayer. We do not stay for the whole hour of chanting.

<http://www.hasekamp.net/suthep.htm>

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wat_Phathat_Doi_Suthep



Wat Phra That Doi Suthep - Chiang Mai

<http://thailandforvisitors.com/north/chiangmai/suthep/>

The temple of Wat Phra That Doi Suthep is certainly one of the most important temples in Chiang Mai, as well as one of the most revered among all Thais. The temple is a major pilgrimage destination during the important Buddhist holidays of Makha Buja and Visak. Its importance, as well as its location, owes much to the legend of its founding.

According to this legend, a Buddha relic, which some say glowed, magically replicated just before it was about to be enshrined in the big [chedi](#) at [Wat Suan Dok](#). The "cloned" relic was placed on the back of a sacred white elephant, which was allowed to roam wherever it wanted.

The elephant eventually climbed to the top of Suthep Mountain, trumpeted three times, turned around three times, knelt down and died. This was taken as a sign that this was the spot where the relic wanted to be, so King Ku Na built the original of the chedi on Doi Suthep at the end of 14th century.

The temple grew and changed in the 600 years since it's founding. In particular, it was extensively renovated in the

economic "boom" years of the early 1990's. From our admittedly western viewpoint, a lot of the charm has been lost as everything was covered in granite and gold. However, the temple remains an important sight that first-time visitors to Chiang Mai shouldn't miss.

The chedi sits in a rather small courtyard at the very peak of the mountain. The courtyard building sits on a larger plaza containing several buildings as well as a lookout point from which you can see, weather permitting, all of Chiang Mai and the surrounding plain.

Among the buildings on the plaza is a small museum displaying old pieces of temple wares as well as some of the more ancient or unique monetary donations to the temple. Note that before entering the courtyard containing the chedi, you must remove your shoes. You must also be dressed appropriately, although the temple can provide some clothing on loan to cover up your naughty knees and slinky shoulders.

After a somewhat hair raising ride down the mountain in the minibus and through the crowded streets of Chiang Mai we dine at a nearby Thai fish restaurant and explore some of the enormous Night Market.

Wednesday 28th February 20 - Chiang Mai - Chiang Khong

Day 05

Today is a travel day as we head further north to Chiang Khong on the banks of the Mekong River and the border with Laos.

Departure is at 09:00 for the 5½-hour journey that with stops will take us all day.

Our first stop is at a roadside tour stop selling locally produced nut and fruit products. The wares are tempting, the dried fruits are delicious but the prices are hardly bargain prices as some are similar to supermarket prices at home. However

the stop is long enough to ensure that everyone succumbs and buys something.

Continuing on we make our next stop, Wat Rong Khun, at a modern style Buddhist Temple being constructed by a Thai artist, Chalermchai Kositpipat, mainly at his own expense. Unlike most Thai temples this one is stark white with shards of mirror imbedded in many surface. The project is reminiscent of Gaudi's, La Sagrada Familiar in Barcelona.

In the Chalermchai's words: -



Wat Rong Khun - Chiang Rai

“ I’ ve constructed a Thai temple with no intention to raise funds or pass the hat for money from anybody. The money, which is offered or donated to the construction, has been from pure faith of Buddhists, who would like to support Buddhism and national cultural arts. I don’ t need any donation from the ones who would like to get hidden benefits from their offerings.”
(brochure)

In order to retain artistic control of the project the maximum donation that will be accepted is US\$250.

The temple is located 13km south of Chiang Rai.

The operation is slick with sales of the artist’ s paintings contributing to the required funds.

<http://www.buddhistchannel.tv/index.php?id=5,1498,0,0,1,0>
http://web.chiangrai.net/tourcr/e_version/index.php?option=rongkhun

This is also our lunch stop. After lunch we make our way into Chiang Rai and visit the Hill Tribes Museum and Education Centre. This small museum presents an

audiovisual of the Hill Tribes and the origins and customs and has a small collection of artifacts from each of the tribal groups.

http://www.gonomad.com/alternatives/0505/hill_tribes_of_thailand.html



Hands reaching up from Buddhist Hell - Wat Rong Khun

From Chiang Rai it is almost 2 hours to our destination at Chiang Khong where our guesthouse is situated on the banks of the Mekong River.

The guesthouse, Ruanthai Sophaphan Lodge, is a remarkable tribute to a tenacious woman, who at the age of 14 started to collect pieces of teak from old buildings and building sites with the intention of collecting enough timber to build a guesthouse. Now aged 56 she is the owner of quite a large guesthouse. In the early days she paid 1 or 2 baht for the timber and as it was either secondhand or off cuts there were few pieces the same

at the time and this is reflected in the construction of the building.



Wat Rong Khun - Chiang Rai

We spent the evening on the balcony enjoying the cool air and the views of the river.



On the balcony at Chiang Khong



Sunrise over the Mekong - Chiang Khong

Mekong River

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mekong>

The **Mekong** is one of the world's major [rivers](#). It is the 13th-longest in the world, and the 10th-largest by volume (discharging 475 km³ of water annually). Its estimated length is 4,023 km. It drains

an area of 795,000 km²: From [Tibet](#) it runs through [China's Yunnan](#) province, [Myanmar](#), [Thailand](#), [Laos](#), [Cambodia](#) and [Vietnam](#). All except China and Myanmar belong to the [Mekong River Commission](#). The extreme seasonal variations in flow and the presence of [rapids](#) and [waterfalls](#) have made [navigation](#) extremely difficult.

http://www.africanwater.org/mekong_river.htm

<http://www.irm.org/programs/mekong/>

http://cantho.cool.ne.jp/mekong/outline/mekong_river_e.html

(includes a map)

<http://www.abc.net.au/rn/science/ockham/stories/s162033.htm>



Ruanthai Sophaphan Lodged and owner - Chiang Khong



Ruanthai Sophaphan Lodge - Chiang Khong



Ruanthai Sophaphan Lodge - Chiang Khong

At 08:30 we are all packed and ready to leave Thailand and cross the Mekong into Laos at Houei Xai. Immigration

formalities and money exchange are time consuming but without difficulty and by mid morning we are on board our boat for the 2-day trip down river to Luang Prabang.

<http://www.laoembassy.com/discover/intro/history.htm>

<http://www.buddhanet.net/e-learning/buddhistworld/laos-txt.htm>
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Geography_of_Laos

<http://www.visit-laos.com/sabbaidee/geography.htm>

<http://www.visit-laos.com/sabbaidee/history.htm>

History

The following section is written by Michael Buckley and is reproduced with kind permission from the Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos Handbook (second edition) published by Moon Publications Inc.

History of Laos

by Michael Buckley

For much of its history, Laos has been under the thumb of its neighbors – at various times the Cambodians, Burmese, Vietnamese, Chinese, and Siamese (Thais). The result is that Laos has experienced great difficulty in establishing a national identity.



Houei Xai across the Mekong in Laos

The earliest inhabitants of Laos were migrants from southern China. From the 11th century onward, parts of Laos fell under the Khmer Empire, and later under Siamese influence from the Sukhothai dynasty. With the fall of Sukhothai in 1345, the first kingdom of Laos emerged under Fa Ngum, a Lao prince brought up in the court of Angkor Wat. As the Khmer Empire crumbled, Fa Ngum welded together a new empire, which he modestly christened ' Lan Xang' – the Land of a Million Elephants. Lan Xang covered the whole of present-day Laos plus most of Issan (northeast Thailand). Fa Ngum declared himself king of the realm in 1353. Fa Ngum was unable to

subdue the unruly highlanders of the northeast regions; these remained independent of Lan Xang Rule.



Crossing the Mekong River



Boarding our boat for the trip downriver

Upon Fa Ngum' s marriage to a Cambodian princess, the Khmer court gave the Lao king a sacred gold Buddha called Pra Bang. Fa Ngum made Buddhism the state religion, and Pra

Bang became the protector of the Lao kingdom. Nobility pledged allegiance to the king before the statue. Named after Pra Bang was the city of Luang Prabang, the cradle of Lao culture and the centre of the Lao state for the next 200 years.

Monarchs of Lan Xang

Fa Ngum' s son, Samsenthai, who reigned 1373-1416, consolidated the royal administration, developing Luang Prabang as a trading and religious center. His death was followed by unrest under a swift succession of lackluster monarchs. Luang Prabang came under increasing threat from incursions by the Vietnamese and later the Burmese. In 1563, King Settathirat declared Vientiane the capital of Lan Xang, and built Wat Pra Keo to house the Emerald Buddha, a gift from the king of Ceylon, as a new talisman for the kingdom. Settathirat is revered as one of the great Lao kings because he protected the nation from foreign subjugation. When he disappeared in 1574 on a military campaign, the kingdom rapidly declined and was subject to Burmese invasion. There was a quick and lackluster succession of kings after Settathirat.

King Souligna Vongsa, who ruled 1633-94, brought stability and peace back to the kingdom – a period regarded as Lan Xang' s golden age.



Gathering Mekong Seaweed



Riverside Village - Mekong River



Fishermen - Mekong River



4095 Water Buffalo - Mekong River

Siamese Satellite

When Souligna Vongsa died in 1694 without an heir, the leadership of Lan Xang was contested, and the nation split into three kingdoms. The area around Vientiane was taken over by Souligna' s nephew, supported by the Annamites from

northern Vietnam; Souliga's grandson controlled the area around Luang Prabang, while another prince controlled the southern kingdom of Champassak, with Thai backing. China, Burma, and Vietnam briefly held sway over these kingdoms; bands of Chinese marauders terrorized the north of the country.

The power of Lan Xang waned; gradually, the Thais extended their influence over most of Laos until it became a Siamese satellite state. In the 1820s, Vientiane's king Anou rebelled against Siamese interference and attacked the Thais. The Thai response was to sack Vientiane in 1827, razing most of the city.

Land of the Lotus-Eaters

In the late 19th century, the king of Siam, seeking to keep Thailand free of foreign domination, ceded a large tract of territory – equivalent of what is now Laos and Cambodia combined – to the French. A series of treaties released more Lao territories to the French between 1893 and 1907. Former Lao territories were thus united again, although the three kingdoms founded in the late 17th century remained in existence, and tribal princes were able

to increase their power by collaborating with the French. The French gave the new protectorate the name Laos, from *les Laos*, the plural term for the people of Laos.



Gathering Mekong Seaweed



Riverside Village - Mekong River

Laos was a low-key French protectorate, known as the land of the lotus-eaters, where an indolent lifestyle prevailed. It was too

mountainous for plantations, there was little in the way of mining, and the Mekong was not suitable for commercial navigation. The French built very few roads – the main colonial route constructed was from Luang Prabang through Vientiane to Savannakhet and the Cambodian frontier. The French built no higher-education facilities; some half-hearted attempts were made to cultivate rubber and coffee, but the main export under the French was opium. Only a few hundred French resided in Laos. They adopted a dissolute lifestyle with Lao or Annamite consorts, and left the running of the place to Vietnamese civil servants. The king was allowed to remain in Luang Prabang, trade was left to resident Vietnamese and Chinese, and the Lao carried on farming as they had for hundreds of years.

During the colonial period, administration, health care, and education hardly made any impact or progress at all. The only significant change for ordinary folk was the presence of obnoxious tax collectors, a frequent cause of uprisings. In the lowlands, revolts were quickly put down, but in the highlands of Xieng Khuang and the Bolovens Plateau, the French had trouble deploying their heavy weaponry. Sometimes a remission of taxes led to pacification.

The 50-year French sojourn in Laos came to an abrupt end in March 1945, when the Japanese took control of the government and interned the Vichy French. With the surrender of Japan in August that year, the Lao Issara (Free Laos) movement declared liberation from the French in September, and set about establishing an alternative government. The Lao Issara leader was Prince Phetsarath, a nephew of the king. Other key players

in the Lao Issara were his half-brothers, Prince Souvanna Phouma and Prince Souphanouvong.

King Sisavang Vong sided with the French, and the movement for Lao independence was crushed, causing Prince Phetsarath and Prince Souvanna Phouma to flee to Thailand. King Sisavang Vong was crowned constitutional monarch of all Laos in 1946. Meanwhile, the Lao Issara dissolved, and a splinter group called the Pathet Lao formed a new resistance group based in northeast Laos. The Pathet Lao were led by Prince Souphanouvong and backed by the Vietminh of North Vietnam. Prince Souvanna Phouma returned to Vientiane and joined the newly formed Royal Lao Government.

The French granted full sovereignty to Laos in 1953, but the Pathet Lao regarded the royalist government as Western-dominated. When in 1954 the French made a last stand at Dien Bien Phu, it ended badly, with a stunning defeat. The weary French started a withdrawal from Indochina; at this point, the US started supplying the Royal Lao Government with arms.



Fishermen - Mekong River



Water Buffalo - Mekong River

Civil War Skirmishes

The US-backed Royal Lao Government ruled over a divided country from 1951 to 1954. The Geneva Conference of July 1954 granted full independence to Laos but did not settle the

issue of who would rule. Prince Souvanna Phouma, a neutralist, operated from Vientiane; in the south, right-wing, pro-US Prince Boun Oum of Champassak dominated the Pakse area. In the far north, Prince Souphanouvong led the leftist resistance movement, the Pathet Lao, drawing support from North Vietnam.



Speedboats - Mekong River

In 1959, the Lao king died and was succeeded by his son, Sisavang Vattana. Over the next few years there were a number of unsuccessful attempts to set up a coalition government to bring royalists and communists together. Souvanna Phouma became Prime Minister in 1956 and tried to integrate his half-brother's Pathet Lao forces into a coalition government. That government was toppled in 1958. Fighting broke out between the Royal Lao Army and the Pathet Lao in 1960; in 1961, a neutral independent government was set up under Prince Souvanna Phouma, based in Vientiane. A second attempt at a coalition government floundered in 1962 due to the

widening war in Vietnam. The neutralists later joined forces with the Pathet Lao to oppose forces backed by the US and Thailand.

The Dirty War

For the next decade, Laos was plagued by civil war, coups, counter coups, and chaos, and was dragged headlong into the Vietnam War. Laos became a pawn of the superpowers, with Hmong tribesmen trained by CIA agents, Thai mercenaries fighting for the Royal Lao government, and the Pathet Lao receiving help from the Chinese, the Russians, and the Vietminh.

During the Vietnam War, Laos was effectively partitioned into four spheres of influence: the Chinese in the north, the Vietnamese along the Ho Chi Minh Trail in the east, the Thais in western areas controlled by the US-backed Royal Lao Government, and the Khmer Rouge operating from parts of the south. Because of the Ho Chi Minh Trail, Laos was subjected to saturation bombing by aerial raids launched from Thailand and from within Laos. In this undeclared dirty war, the tonnage of bombs dropped by US bombers on the northern Lao provinces of

Xieng Khuang, Sam Neua, the Phong Saly between 1964 and 1973 exceeded the entire tonnage dropped over Europe by all sides during WWII. It is estimated that US forces flew almost 600,000 sorties – the equivalent of one bombing run every eight minutes around the clock for nine years. This air assault was shrouded in secrecy, since under the terms of the Geneva Accord of 1962 no foreign personnel were supposed to operate on Laotian territory. The Vietminh and the Chinese also violated Laos' neutrality with infantry divisions deployed in the north. In the early days of the bombing, American pilots dressed in civilian clothing flew old planes with Royal Lao markings; Thai and Hmong pilots were also trained to fly missions.



Small Village - Mekong River

So confusing did the number of Laotian coups become that the Americans were unsure which Phoumi, Phouma, Phoui, Souvanna, or Souvanou was in power at any given time. American journalist Malcolm Browne described this bewildering era thus:



Boat heading upstream - Mekong River

"Laos was as improbable as the Looking Glass world ruled by the Red Queen, the White Queen and Alice. Its towns and trackless jungles swarmed with guerillas, communist agents, Special Forces troopers, armed tribesmen, opium growers, an international corps of mercenaries and sundry camp followers. Vientiane was awash with the dollars pouring in with the foreigners. The Chinese-owned gold shops along Samsentai Street did a booming business in twenty-four karat gold bracelets, each weighing five ounces or more. Customers included pilots of the CIA's Air America, French military advisors, Belgian mercenaries, spooks, assassins and journalists. Foreigners bought gold bracelets on the theory that if they were shot down or wounded, they could pay for help from tribesmen with gold, the only currency universally respected in Laos."

Pathet Lao Victory

In 1973, as the US began its strategic withdrawal from Vietnam, the Pathet Lao gained the upper hand, controlling most of the country's provinces. In 1975, with the fall of Saigon and Phnom Penh, opposition to the Pathet Lao crumbled. The Pathet Lao took Pakse, Champassak, Savannakhet, and finally Vientiane without opposition, establishing the Lao People's Democratic Republic (Lao PDR).

This section was written by Michael Buckley from the Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos Handbook

After the heat of Bangkok and Chaing Mai it is pleasant on the river as we travel down river past the villages and through the many rapids in this part of the river. The river is shallow as it is 3 months since the monsoon rains ended. The countryside is also quite dry and yesterday there was evidence of small bush and grass fires.

In some places the rapids are quite violent. Fishing nets are set up on the rocky outcrops of the riverbanks between which there are large deposits of sand

brought down by the river. At full flood the river may be 20m above its present level.

Fishermen in boats or on the banks are common and from time there are groups of women harvesting 'mekong seaweed' or panning for gold.

<http://www.rwesa.org/lancang/downstream.html>

Mekong seaweed, 'Kai' as it is called by the Thai and Lao, is the main source of protein for villagers living in the upper reaches of the river. Kai grows on rapids and shallow riverbanks during the dry season when the water is clear and sunlight can reach it. For many local women, Kai is their families' food security as well as a source of income. Due to the changing water levels, Kai has not grown along the sediment filled Mekong from the Burmese-Lao border to Chaing Khong district in the north.



Sandy Banks - Mekong River



Pak Beng - Mekong River Peanuts are cultivated in the sand banks. Planted as the flood recedes after the monsoon, they are ready for harvest after about 4 months.

We dock at the small town of Pak Beng to spend the night.

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pakbeng>

<http://wikitravel.org/en/Pakbeng>

The path to the village is up a steep, long sandy slope and I decide a porter can carry my bag, as does every one else; well worth if for a \$1.50. The standard of accommodation in this trading port is basic and simple but comfortable.

An evening walk, before dinner, through the town to the small temple helps us loosen up after sitting in the boat all day.

Once a small stop and the trip from Chiang Khong to Luang Prabang, Pak Beng is becoming a busy tourist stop as more

guest houses and hotels are being built by returning refugees bringing their money and investing in the local economy.

Friday 2nd March 2007- Mekong River

Day 07

At 08:00 we are already for the walk down to the boat and again I have a porter carry the bag. Discretion is the better part of valour in these cases.

When we arrived last night we were the only boat; this morning there are about ten tied up to the riverbank. We are soon under way heading downstream into the mist. It is cool on the river. However soon after nine the sun appears and it starts to warm up and with so many boats heading downstream it is busy

Downstream of Pak Beng the Mekong flows between high mountains in a narrow valley. Again there are the rocky cliffs and the sandbanks between them. In shallower parts of the river the current is strong and turbulent.

Our first stop is at a riverside village where small children selling textiles made by the local women greet us and we visit the Khok Aek Secondary School.



Early Morning - Pak Beng



Early Morning - Pak Beng



Heading for the boat in the morning mist - Pak Beng



Mist shrouded Mekong River



Pak Ou Caves - Mekong River

There are 70 students in the first 3 years of secondary school. Students wishing to continue on to years 4 – 6 must go to Luang Prabang.

The school has few facilities and the teacher appreciates the parcel of books and pens that we have brought with us. Apparently the teachers are paid in sticky rice that the villagers grow on the hillsides. They are able to exchange this for other food and sell the surplus in the market.

Much of the agriculture is slash and burn on the hillsides with sticky rice, corn, chillies, melons, and some fruits. Where there is sufficient space on the riverbanks gardens are also established.



Turbulent rapids in a narrow gorge - Mekong River

There are many small teak plantations to be seen as we cruise along. At this time of year the trees are leafless, but when the rains come the large leaves will come again.

Our second stop is at the Pak Ou Caves

<http://www.edwebproject.org/susanne/luangprabang3.html>

Pak Ou Caves

<http://www.laos.co.uk/PakOu.html>

People have been climbing into the Pak Ou caves, high above the Mekong some 25km from Luang Prabang, for maybe a couple of thousand years.



Khok Aek Secondary School - Mekong River



New House - Khok Aek - Mekong River

They were used for the worship of the river spirit until Buddhism spread into Laos along the southern route from India.

And gradually, over the 60 decades, more than 4,000 Buddha images – mostly the standing Buddha of the Luang Prabang style – have been placed in them.

There are two caves in a striking limestone cliff where the Nam Ou river meets the Mekong.

The lower and smaller, called Tham Ting, is open to the light some 50ft above the river; but the higher cave, Tham Phum, is deep and impenetrably black without a torch.

The two caves were apparently discovered by King Setthathirath in the 16th C. They are studded with thousands of Buddha images – 2500 in the lower cave and 1500 in the upper cave – of both wooden and metal design, some thought to be over 3000 years old. For years the caves, which locals believe to be the home of guardian spirits, were inhabited by monks. The king visited the caves during Lao New Year, staying at Ban Pak Ou, the village across the river. The caves are one of the main venues for Phimar in April, with locals making the pilgrimage up river from Luang Prabang.

We re-board our boat and continue to the former royal capital of Luang Prabang arriving in the late afternoon.



Riverbank Gardens - Mekong River



Teak Plantations - Mekong River



Pak Ou - Mekong River



Pak Ou Caves - Mekong River

Luang Prabang

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Luang_Prabang

Luang Prabang, or Louangphrabang, is a city in [Laos](#); it was formerly the capital of a kingdom of the same name. The city of

Luang Prabang is located in north central Laos, on the [Mekong River](#) about 425 km north of [Vientiane](#). It has a population of about 22,000.



**Setting Sun - Mekong River - near
Luang Prabang**

Until the communist takeover in [1975](#), it was the royal capital, the seat of the [kingdom of Laos](#). Today it is a [UNESCO World Heritage Site](#). The city is the capital of the [Louangphrabang Province](#).

History

[Muang Sua](#) was the old name of **Luang Prabang** following its conquest in [698](#) A.D. by a [Tai](#) prince, [Khun Lo](#), who seized his opportunity when [Nan-chao](#) was engaged elsewhere. Khun Lo had been awarded the town by his father, [Khun Borom](#), who is associated with the Lao legend of the creation of the world, which the Lao share with the [Shan](#) and other peoples of the region. Khun Lo established a dynasty whose fifteen rulers reigned over an independent Muang Sua for the better part of a century.

In the second half of the [8th century](#), Nan-chao intervened frequently in the affairs of the principalities of the middle Mekong Valley, resulting in the occupation of Muang Sua in [709](#). Nan-chao princes or administrators replaced the aristocracy of Tai overlords. Dates of the occupation are not known, but it probably ended well before the northward expansion of the [Khmer empire](#) under [Indravarman I](#) (r. 877-89) and extended as far as the territories of [Sipsong Panna](#) on the upper [Mekong](#).

In the meantime, the Khmers founded an outpost at [Xay Fong](#) near [Vientiane](#), and [Champa](#) expanded again in southern Laos, maintaining its presence on the banks of the Mekong until [1070](#). [Chanthaphanit](#), the local ruler of Xay Fong, moved north to Muang Sua and was accepted peacefully as ruler after the departure of the Nan-chao administrators. Chanthaphanit and his son had long reigns, during which the town became known by the [Tai](#) name **Xieng Dong Xieng Thong**. The dynasty eventually became involved in the squabbles of a number of

principalities. [Khun Chuang](#), a warlike ruler who may have been a [Kammu](#) (alternate spellings include Khamu and Khmu) tribesman, extended his territory as a result of the warring of these principalities and probably ruled from [1128](#) to [1169](#). Under Khun Chuang, a single family ruled over a far-flung territory and reinstituted the [Siamese](#) administrative system of the [7th century](#). At some point, [Theravada Buddhism](#) was subsumed by [Mahayana Buddhism](#).

Xieng Dong Xieng Thong experienced a brief period of Khmer [suzerainty](#) under [Jayavarman VII](#) from [1185](#) to [1191](#). By [1180](#) the Sipsong Panna had regained their independence from the Khmers, however, and in [1238](#) an internal uprising in the Khmer outpost of [Sukhodaya](#) expelled the Khmer overlords.

Xieng Dong Xieng Thong in [1353](#) became the capital of [Lan Xang](#). The capital was moved in [1560](#) by King [Setthathirath I](#) to [Vien Chang](#) (Vientiane), which remains the capital today.

In [1707](#), Lan Xang fell apart and Luang Prabang became the capital of the independent Luang Prabang kingdom. When [France](#) annexed Laos, the French recognized Luang Prabang as the royal residence of Laos. Eventually, the ruler of Luang Prabang became synonymous with the [figurehead](#) of the French Protectorate of Laos. When Laos achieved independence, the king of Luang Prabang, [Sisavang Vong](#), became the [head of state](#) for the [Kingdom of Laos](#).



Wat Xieng Thong - Luang Prabang

Luang Prabang is situated in the hills of northern Laos on the confluence of the Mekong and Khan Rivers. There are many temples and French colonial style buildings.

Our first visit is to the Royal Palace Museum, which has remained untouched since the royal family departed in 1975.

<http://asiaforvisitors.com/laos/prabang/museum/index.html>
<http://www.nara.accu.or.jp/english/information/world/heritage/royal.html>



Future home for the Phra Bang Buddha - Luang Prabang

Royal Palace Museum

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Royal_Palace_Museum

The Royal Palace (official name "Haw Kham") in [Luang Prabang, Laos](#) was built in [1904](#) during the [French](#) colonial era for King [Sisavang Vong](#) and his family. The site for the palace was chosen so that official visitors to Luang Prabang could

disembark from their river voyages directly below the palace and be received there. After the death of King Sisavang Vong, the crown Prince [Savang Vatthana](#) and his family were the last to occupy the grounds. In [1975](#), the monarchy was overthrown by the communists and the Royal Family were taken to re-education camps. The palace was then converted into a museum.



Palace Museum from Mt Phousi - Luang Prabang

The building

The architecture of the building has a mixed of traditional [Lao](#) motifs and French [Beaux Arts](#) styles, and has been laid out in a double-cruciform shape with the entrance on one side of the

lower crossbar. The steps to the entrance are made of [Italian](#) marble. There are a variety of royal religious objects on display in the large entrance hall.



Buddha - Wat Xieng Thong - Luang Prabang

On the right of the entrance is the King's reception room, where busts of the Lao monarchy are displayed along with two large gilded and lacquered [Ramayana](#) screens, crafted by the local artisan [Thit Tanh](#). The room's walls are covered with murals that depict scenes from traditional

Lao lifestyles, painted in [1930](#) by a French artist, [Alix de Fauntereau](#). Each of the walls is intended to be viewed at a different time of day, depending on the light that enters the windows on one side of the room, which matches the time the day depicted.



Shuto and Lauren - Mt Phousi - Luang Prabang

In the right front corner room of the Palace, which opens to the outside, is a collection of the palace's most prized art, including the [Phra Bang](#), cast of a gold, silver and bronze alloy. This [Buddha](#) stands at 83cm tall and weighs around 50kg. Legend has it that the statue was made around the [1st century](#) in [Sri Lanka](#) and was later presented to the [Khmer King Phaya Sirichantha](#), who then gave it to [King Fa Ngum](#) in [1359](#) as a Lao Buddhist leader. The Siamese twice took the image to Thailand in [1779](#) and [1827](#), but it was returned to Laos by [King Mongkut](#) in [1867](#). There are rumours that the one on display is a copy and the original is stored in [Vientiane](#) or [Moscow](#). It is said the real one had gold leaf over the eyes and a hole drilled through

one of its ankle. Also in the room are another Buddha, engraved with large elephant tusks, and three beautiful [saew mǎi khǎn](#) (embroidered silk screens with religious imagery) that were crafted by the Queen.



Sticky rice fermenting for Lao Lao - Luang Prabang

On the left of the entrance hall, the secretary's reception room is filled with paintings, silver and china that have been presented to Laos as diplomatic gifts from [Myanmar](#), [Cambodia](#), [Thailand](#), [Poland](#), [Hungary](#), [Russia](#), [Japan](#), [Vietnam](#), [China](#), [Nepal](#), [USA](#), [Canada](#) and [Australia](#). These objects are grouped by "socialist" and "capitalist" countries.

The next room to the left was once the Queen's reception room. Large royal portraits of King [Sisavang Vatthana](#), Queen [Khumphoui](#) and Crown Prince [Cong Savang](#), painted by Russian artist [Ilya Glazunov](#) in [1967](#), are hung on the walls. Also displayed are friendship flags from China and Vietnam and replica's of sculpture from [New Delhi's Indian National Museum](#).



**Funeral Carriage - Wat Xieng Thong
- Luang Prabang**

In the far rooms are the royal family's bedrooms and living quarters. The bedrooms have been preserved as they were in 1975 when the king departed. There is a dining hall and a room that contain royal seals and medals.

After visiting the museum we obtain tickets for the cultural show in the evening in the Palace Grounds and then Lauren and I arrange to take a songthaew to visit a number of craft villages at 11:30 which

gives us enough time to climb Mount Phousi for the commanding views of Luang Prabang and the Mekong and Khan Rivers.



**Sheets of Mekong Seaweed and Sesame seeds drying in
the sun - Luang Prabang**



Lao Lao Still - Luang Prabang



**Young girl weaving a bookmark - Ban XangKhong - Luang
Prabang**



**Organic dyes for dyeing silk - Ban XangKhong - Luang
Prabang**

A **songthaew** is a truck-based vehicle with a pair of bench seats in the back, one on either side. They may be 3 or 4 wheeled and are sometimes referred to as tuk-tuks.

The first village is where the Lao rice whisky, Lao Lao, is produced. The whole village is involved in its production.

Sticky rice is first steamed and then placed in bins with yeast. Fermentation proceeds for one week and after additional water has been added fermentation continues for another week. When fermentation is complete the fermented liquor is distilled in a very simple still to obtain the required percentage of alcohol. The still is a vessel with a take off pipe at the top to carry the distillate to a cooling tank where the vapour is condensed and passes out the bottom into a container. It is pretty fiery stuff and certainly an acquired taste.

Residues from the rice are fed to pigs.

Next is a silk and paper making village where we are able to see most of the process of producing silk from worms to cocoon and some spinning and dyeing and the production of paper from the bark of the Saa or mulberry tree.

As it is Saturday many of the weavers are not working, however the showrooms are

open and are filled beautifully woven and colourful textiles.



Making Sa Paper - Ban XangKhong - Luang Prabang



Racing Boats - Wat Xieng Thong - Luang Prabang

Sa paper is made from the fibre and starch of the bark of the Saa tree. The bark is first boiled with wood ash to bleach the fibre so that it is creamy white and the bark is beaten with a mallet to separate the fibres. The fibre, mixed with the starch

from the bark, is spread on flywire mesh frames to form a matte that is allowed to dry in the sun. Sometimes leaves and flowers are imbedded in the matte surface to create a pleasing pattern and dyes are also added to colour the paper.



Wat Xieng Thong - Luang Prabang



Royal Ballet Performance - Luang Prabang

http://www.chiangmai-chiangrai.com/bamboo_and_sa_paper.html
http://www.culturalprofiles.net/laos/Directories/Laos_Cultural_Profile/-1058.html

We then return to town to visit a silversmith's workshop. Interesting to watch intricate patterns being created with a simple punch.

Having completed our tour we ask to be dropped at the Wat Xieng Thang where we stroll around for about 30 minutes

<http://www.marymount.k12.ny.us/marynet/studentresources/art/southeastasia/laos/html/vatxiengthongrat.html>

Wat Xieng Thong is Luang Prabang's most magnificent temple. It is located at the tip of the northern peninsula formed by the Mekong River and the Nam Khan.

Wat Xieng Thang was built during the 16th C by King Setthathirath and completed in 1560. The temple is one of the most interesting examples of Buddhist art and architecture of the time. The intricate golden face, colourful murals, glass mosaics and unique three layered roof make this one of the most beautiful

temples in Asia. The temple once organized the highest Royal ceremonies, and houses the ashes of King Sisavangvong. The ornate carved and gilded funeral vehicle of the former King is kept within the grounds.



Monkeys - Luang Prabang

In the evening we attended the Royal Theatre for a performance of traditional dances and theatre.

The Ballet performed a traditional piece 'Sida's Trial by Fire'. Sida was abducted by the Giant King and on his death returns to the Court where husband doubts her faithfulness. She offers to submit to a trial by fire to prove her innocence.

All a bit hard to follow if we had not had a sheet describing events! Performance by the Monkey Army included realistic monkey actions like scratching and removing fleas from one another.



Hmong Musician/Dancers - Luang Prabang



Amazingly Strong Jaws - Luang Prabang

Afterwards on the Palace Lawns a group of Hmong hill tribe people performed some traditional music and dance.

Three of the group, two men and a woman demonstrated the strength of their jaws by picking up a water jug containing about

20 litres of water between their teeth and then dancing about with it.

Luang Prabang is a UNESCO World Heritage Site and a number of parts of the

town are protected from inappropriate development.

As a result tourism is increasing in this charming town and there is pressure for more accommodation. In the restricted areas

French Colonial buildings are being converted to tourist accommodation.

Sunday 4th March 2007 – Luang Prabang

Day 09



Kuang Si Falls - Luang Prabang

Eight of us have chosen to take the 3 to 4-hour walk through the countryside to the Kuang Si falls. The rest will take a songthaew direct to the falls.



At the start of the trek to Kuang Si Falls - Luang Prabang

Our songthaews arrive at 08:00 to take us on the one-hour drive into the mountains to a hill village where we will commence the walk. A slight delay occurs when one of the songthaews breaks down and everyone has to pile into the same one. These little trucks with 1400cc engines struggle in the mountains with 8 heavy Europeans on board. Fortunately we don't have to go far and at about 09:30 we commence the trek by walking

through the village. Most of the village houses are timber with woven bamboo walls and thatch or corrugated iron roofs. The village is spotless. There is no rubbish to be seen and the animals are mostly penned.



Funnel web beside the track - Luang Prabang

Our walk takes us through high valleys and over a number of low ridges, through areas cleared for farming and jungle areas. Birds can be heard calling in the nearby jungle but we see very few. Our guide points out edible plants along the way.



Kuang Si Falls - Luang Prabang

After about 2½ hours we come to a clear mountain pool. This, we are told, is the headwater of the stream that feeds the Kuang Si falls. We take a break for a few minutes. I counted at least a dozen varieties of colourful butterflies flying about. Impossible to photograph them!

We continue on for another 40 minutes to the top of the falls and from there is a terrific view of the valley below. Our way down is a series of steps, steep paths and stairs that eventually bring us to the

bottom of the fall where we can now see the turquoise waters cascade over limestone formations.

http://www.mekongexpress.com/laos/articles/dc_0396_kuangsifalls.htm



Along the track - Luang Prabang



Rest stop at the waterhole - Luang Prabang



Kuang Si Falls - Luang Prabang



Water driven grain crusher - Kuang Si Falls - Luang Prabang

Due to a recent rock fall the pool at the base of the falls is no longer safe for swimming. However the stream continues to cascade into a number of pools and further downstream there is a pool that is safe for swimming and many of the group take a dip.

Near the falls is a wildlife sanctuary housing a female Indo-Chinese Tiger, named Phet, rescued from poachers when she was only a few days old. As she has no hunting skills she cannot be returned to the wild. She was rescued in August 2000.

<http://www.laos.co.uk/Phet.html>

<http://www.careforthewild.com/>

Nearby is an enclosure housing 11 Asiatic Black Bears who at different times were rescued after their mother had been shot by poachers. These Bears are being trained to forage for food and may, in time, be able to be released to the wild.

<http://www.bearlao.com/home.htm>

These animals are hunted for their body parts that are said to have amazing medicinal properties.

After watching the bears search for the food that had been hidden by the refuge staff we made our way a little further down hill to a food stall for lunch. By the time we returned to town it was 16:00.



Shuto takes a plunge - Kuang Si Falls - Luang Prabang



Bathers - Kuang Si Falls - Luang Prabang



Phet - Indo-Chinese Tiger - Kuang Si Falls - Luang Prabang



Asiatic Black Bear seeking food - Kuang Si Falls - Luang Prabang

We end the day with dinner at the Three Elephants Restaurant.

Today we take the bus from Luang Prabang to Vang Vieng (approximately 7 hours).

Our scheduled departure time is 08:30. However most of us are up much earlier to catch the monks at 06:30 as they do their rounds collecting alms from the citizens and tourists.



Old Lady - Luang Prabang

This over, we return to the hotel for breakfast before heading up the steep winding road that is Route 13 that leads to Vang Vieng.



Parade of Monks receiving alms from the group - Luang Prabang



Pauline, Trina and Courtney give alms - Luang Prabang

The road successively climbs high into the mountains, travels along or over a ridge, passing hill villages on the way, and then

plunges in a valley before climbing again. This is not a road for weak stomachs as it twists and turns.

We reach Vang Vieng late in the afternoon, with just enough time to go for a drink at sunset at the Smile Bar by the banks of the Song River.



Lunch Stop - Luang Prabang to Vang Vieng

There are many foreigners in the town, but their major activity seems to be sleeping in hammocks or whiling away the time in restaurants and coffee shops. It is said this is the drug capital of Laos and some establishments have signs warning against smoking illicit drugs on thief premises.

Some of the younger members of the group have been offered drugs.

http://wikitravel.org/en/Vang_Viang
<http://www.news.com.au/travel/story/0,23483,20635909-27983,00.html>
http://realtravel.com/vang_viang-photos-p3790816-3808323.html



Boys with siblings - Lunch Stop -
Luang Prabang to Vang Vieng

Vang Vieng

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vang_Viang

Vang Vieng is a town in the People's Democratic Republic of [Lao](#), located in [Vientiane Province](#). The population is around 25,000.



View from the Smile Bar - Vang Vieng

Town history

One of the main features of the town is a long mostly unused airfield runway parallel to the river. It was used during the [Vietnam War](#) by the [Air America](#)'s planes. The now disused airstrip in Vang Vieng was then called "Lima site 6".

Laos has the dubious honour of being the most bombed country in history. There are still many areas of the country, mainly in the east along [Ho Chi Minh Trail](#) and in the north-east that are dangerous to walk through due to many remaining [landmines](#), and it is not uncommon for [farmers](#), their families, and their livestock to tread on an old, yet still active mine. The town started to grow in the 1980s, due to the influx of [backpackers](#).

Vang Vieng today



Smile Bar - Vang Vieng



Relaxing at the Smile Bar - Vang Vieng

Vang Vieng today is mainly a backpacker town. The main street is littered with guest houses, bars, restaurants, internet cafes and tour agencies. Almost all the restaurants have large televisions playing [American sitcoms](#) (usually [Friends](#)), and recent films on a rotational basis. One of the main attractions of the town is [inner tubing](#) on the river. Whilst floating downriver

there are several places to stop, mostly small family-owned bars or just simply an enterprising local with a bucket filled with ice cold bottles of [Beer Lao](#), and also several good spots for jumping into the river from the bank or a specially-constructed bridge. During the [wet season](#), the river can be a series of raging

[rapids](#), but during the [dry season](#), some of it is little more than a trickle.

The [market](#) is located five kilometers north of the town selling Lao textiles, household items and several stalls selling dubious foodstuffs. It is possible for stalls to sell [bats](#), [squirrels](#), [monkeys](#), [rats](#), [mice](#) and other animals as food. In the town there is a [wat](#) that is notable in looking rundown and keeping its valuables chained behind a door. The town is situated on the

main north-south highway from [Luang Prabang](#) to the capital, [Vientiane](#).

But the real attractions of the area are the scenery, the [limestone](#) hills and the numerous [caves](#) and [caverns](#). Perhaps the most interesting is the [Tham Phu Kham](#) cave, half an hour's spine-compacting ride away from Vang Vieng by [tuk-tuk](#) or rented motorbike.

Tuesday 6th March 2007 - Vang Vieng - Vientiane

Day 11

Apart from our departure at 15:00 for Vientiane, today is free and everyone has their own plans, some decide on kayaking on the Song River and others to have a rest day.

I have no particular plan except to head out with the camera around 08:15 and see what there is to see. Originally I had thought to be back in the hotel by 12:30 so I could spend some time on the diary.

This was not to be!

I started out heading north along the main street past the restaurants and bars and temples towards the outskirts of town. There is not much of interest to

photograph apart from the temples and the evidence of the growing prosperity of the town due to growing tourism. Substantial brick and concrete homes with coloured cement sheet roofing are replacing traditional houses.



New Houses - Vang Vieng

After walking for nearly an hour I turn back and enter some of the side streets. Here the day-to-day life is more exposed and there is less evidence of the growing wealth.



Traditional House - Vang Vieng

Finally my wandering takes me into the streets near the river in the centre of town and I come upon a sign to Lusi Cave – 2km.



Bell Tower - Wat Kang - Vang Vieng

It is not yet 10:00 so I should be able to walk to the cave, have a look and be back at the hotel in time. So I set off across the bamboo bridge (these bridges are washed away in the wet season) and head out across the rice fields following a series of flags marking the route until I arrive at Pha Poak Mountain, a small rugged limestone hill poking out of the plain. The town is surrounded by limestone karst mountains, many less than 2km from the centre of the town but the haze is so dense that they

are almost impossible to see them, so it is not until I am within about 200m of Pha Poak that I can clearly see the wooden ladders up the side leading to the peak.



Traditional House - Vang Vieng



Bamboo Bridges across the Song River - Vang Vieng



Song River - Vang Vieng



Resort Hotel - Vang Vieng

<http://www.geocities.com/~nesst/limestone.htm>

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Karst>

<http://istrianet.org/istria/geosciences/index.htm>

For 5000kip the gatekeeper will open the gate so that one can climb to the top to get a view of Vang Vieng. Because of the haze I don't expect much, but the climb is a challenge so I start up and once on my way I am not going to turn back. From the start it is fairly rough going up the ladders or scrambling over the rocks. Higher up scrambling up the rock, hands and feet is the only way. Fortunately the rocks are firm and the footing and handholds are secure so I make steady progress to the top. Very hot work even though the haze hides the sun. At the top the view is as expected; it would be terrific on a clear day if there ever is one.



Pha Poak Mountain - Vang Vieng

Down is not so straight forward, ageing knees and ankles don't cope so well with downhill and I take it very carefully. Near the bottom I meet a young man going up. His partner is waiting at the bottom and I sit with her until he returns so we can go to the Lusi cave together. He returns in about 30 minutes and we head of

another km to the cave mouth. The guide will follow on bicycle.



Entrance to Lusi Cave - Vang Vieng



Lusi Cave - Vang Vieng

We have to wait 10 minutes for him and by now it is midday. At the cave there are two options. A forty-minute walk in the cave or a 2 hour return walk to a lagoon deep inside the cave. I do not have enough time for the longer walk and as the girl is not interested, the young man and

I opt for the shorter walk. It proved to be enough to get a feel for the cave and as the footing was very slippery in places I found it quite hard going after climbing the mountain.



Lusi Cave - Vang Vieng



New Hospital - Vang Vieng

The three of us walked back to town together and I arrived back at the hotel at 13:45: enough time to have a drink, a shower and finish packing, but not enough time for any work on the diary.

What had started out as a quite walk around town had turned into a rather exhausting day.

We departed on time at 15:00, crossing the old airstrip as we departed, on what I hoped might be a smooth

enough trip to allow a little sleep, a vain hope, the road was not as winding as yesterday but the road was regularly crossed by a series of humps which even when taken slowly bounced the bus severely.

We arrived at our hotel in Vientiane at about 18:30 and after we freshen up we headed out to dinner.

Wednesday 7th March 2007 - Vientiane

Day 12



Victory Arch - Vientiane

<http://www.visit-laos.com/where/vientiane/>

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vientiane>



http://realtravel.com/vang_vieng-photos-p3790816-3808323.html

Vientiane

This article is about the city. For other administrative entities see [Vientiane Prefecture](#) and [Vientiane Province](#).

Vientiane (vyen ty天n, [Lao](#) ວຽງຈັນ Viangchan) is the [capital city](#) of [Laos](#), situated in the [Mekong Valley](#). The

estimated population of the city is 200,000 ([2005](#)) while the number of people living in the Vientiane metropolitan area (the entire Vientiane Prefecture and parts of Vientiane Province) is believed to be over 730,000. Vientiane is located at 17°58' North, 102°36' East (17.9667, 102.6). [\[1\]](#)



Hotel Courtyard - Vientiane



Approaching Pha That Luang -
Vientiane

Administration

Vientiane is located in and is the capital of the [Vientiane Prefecture](#) (*kampheng nakhon Vientiane*). There is also the [Vientiane Province](#) — the prefecture was split off from the province in 1989.

Vientiane city comprises the following districts:

- [Chantabuly](#)

- [Hadxaifong](#)
- [Sikhottabong](#)
- [Sisattanak](#)
- [Xaysetha](#)



Forecourt - Victory Arch - Vientiane



Stalls inside the Victory Arch - Vientiane

Geography

Vientiane is situated on a sweeping bend on the [Mekong](#) river, which forms the border with [Thailand](#) at this point.



My Songthaew - Vientiane



Art Exhibition - Pha That Luang - Vientiane



Niches housing Buddha Images - Wat Si Saket - Vientiane

History

The great Laotian epic, the [Phra Lak Phra Lam](#), claims that Prince Thattaradtha founded the city when he left the legendary Lao kingdom of *Muong Inthapatha Maha Nakhone* because he was denied the throne in favor of his younger brother. Thattaradtha originally founded a city called *Maha Thani Si Phan Phao* on the western banks of the [Mekong River](#); this city was told to have later

become today's [Udon Thani, Thailand](#). One day, a seven-headed [Naga](#) told Thattaradtha to start a new city on the eastern bank of the river opposite *Maha Thani Si Phan Phao*. The prince called this city *Chanthabuly Si Sattanakhanahud*, which was told to be the predecessor of modern Vientiane.



<http://www.trekearth.com/gallery/Asia/Laos/photo331824.htm>

Pha That Luang - Vientiane

Contrary to the Phra Lak Phra Lam, most historians believe Vientiane was an early [Khmer](#) settlement centered around a [Hindu](#) temple, which the Pha That Luang would later replace. In the [11th](#) and [12th centuries](#), the time when the [Lao](#) and [Thai people](#) are believed to have entered [Southeast Asia](#) from [Southern China](#), the few remaining Khmers in the area were either killed, removed, or assimilated into the Lao civilization, which would soon overtake the area.

In [1354](#), when [Fa Ngum](#) founded the kingdom of [Lan Xang](#), Vientiane became an important administrative city, even though

it was not made the capital. King [Setthathirath](#) officially established it as the capital of Lan Xang in [1560](#). When Lan Xang fell apart in [1707](#), it became an independent kingdom. In [1779](#), it was conquered by the Siamese general Phraya [Chakri](#) and made a vassal of [Siam](#).



Ceiling decorated with stories of Buddha - Pha That Luang - Vientiane

When King [Anouvong](#) raised an unsuccessful rebellion, it was obliterated by [Siamese](#) armies in [1827](#). It eventually passed to [French](#) rule in [1893](#). It became the capital of the French protectorate of Laos in [1899](#).

Origin of the name

The name of the city is derived from [Pā li](#), the literary language of [Theravada Buddhism](#), and its original meaning was "The king's grove of [sandalwood](#)", this tree being prized for its fragrance in classical India. It is also believed that the original name of Vientiane (Viangchan) means "City of the Moon" in the

native [Lao language](#). Modern Lao pronunciation and orthography do not clearly reflect the Pali [etymology](#). The romanized spelling "Vientiane" is of [French](#) origin, and reflects the difficulty the French had in pronouncing the hard "ch" syllable of the Lao word; a common English-based spelling is "Viangchan", or occasionally "Wiangchan".



Decaying Paintings - Wat Si Saket - Vientiane

Today is another free day and I don't plan to spend the day walking in the sun from one place to another.



Hanks of silk in the Market - Vientiane



Wat Si Muang - Vientiane

A tuk-tuk with an English speaking guide-driver is a preferred option and Pauline is able to arrange one at the enormous cost of \$US10.



Mystical Animals - Wat Si Muang - Vientiane

At the leisurely hour of 10:30 we set off, the first stop is the Putaxai or Victory Gate built to commemorate the people who had died in post revolutionary wars. Building commenced in 1962 and has an unfinished look about it as it is mostly raw concrete and many of the interior surfaces are covered with graffiti. In fact it has not been finished due to the countries turbulent recent history.

This was before the Pathet Lao finally won the war against government and French forces in 1975. For the equivalent of a few cents one can climb to the very top for commanding views of the city. The Presidential Residence can be seen at the other end of the wide, tree lined LaneXang Avenue below.

Despite the somewhat unfinished look of the arch the gardens and pond are beautifully kept.



**Buddha Image - Haw Phra Kaew -
Vientiane**

Next stop is the Pha That Luang (World Precious Stupa) Laos' s most important national monument.

Pha That Luang

Pha That Luang (The Great Stupa or Sacred Reliquary) is the most significant symbol of both the Buddhist religion and of Lao sovereignty, or Laos' most important and spectacular monument. It is thought that missionaries from the court of Ashoka

in India first erected a shrine here to enclose a breastbone of the Buddha in the 3rd century BC. It was built to hold a piece of the breastbone of the Buddha. The earliest physical remains of a religious structure on this site, however, seem to date from a Khmer monastery around the 12th century. In 1560, King Setthathirat moved his capital of Lan Xang from Luang Prabang to Vientiane and built two primary temples in the city: Haw Pha Kaew Temple and Pha That Luang Temple. Construction of That Luang began in 1566. Actually, Pha That Luang Temple was originally built on the ruins of a 13th century Khmer Temple. Like the rest of Vientiane, it was destroyed in 1828 by the Siamese Military. Covered in gold leaf, it has repeatedly been plundered by Burmese, Siamese and Chinese. A Siamese invasion in 1828 led to massive destruction of the capital and virtual abandonment of That Luang. The restoration was badly done and a 2nd restoration was performed in the 1930s which restored it to its original design, based on the detailed drawings from the late 1860s by the talented French architect and explorer Louis Delaporte.

That Luang holds a special meaning in Laos since it has come to be the symbol of the Lao nation. Even in the past, the King would travel to the temple from Luang Prabang to attend the yearly That Luang Festival. Prior to the overthrow of the Monarchy in 1975, the national symbol of Laos was the three-headed elephant representing the Lao Royal Family. This was changed to the hammer and sickle after the communist revolution. In 1991, the symbol again changed to Pha That Luang temple.



Presidential Residence - Vientiane



Wat Si Saket - Vientiane

Destroyed and pillaged several times in the past centuries, each time it has been rebuilt to its initial splendor with love and patience by the Lao people. It symbolizes the perseverance and the generosity of the Lao people. In a country with such an unstable past, Pha That Luang represents one of the few constants.



**Ornate Decoration - Haw Phra Kaew
- Vientiane**

Pha That Luang consists of pointed stupas with a large central stupa. A cloister, added by King Anouvong in the early 19th century as a defense against invasion, has thick high-walls with tiny windows. Each level of the monument has different architectural features based on Buddhist doctrine. The first level is a square base on which the monument sits. There are also four arched prayer gates, one on each side, with short stairways leading up to and beyond them to the second level.

The second level is surrounded by 120 lotus petals. There are 288 siimaa on this level, as well as 30 small stupas symbolizing the 30 Buddhist perfections beginning with alms-giving and ending with equanimity.



Haw Phra Kaew - Vientiane

Arched gates lead to the next level. The tall central stupa, which has a brick core that has been stuccoed over, is supported here by a bowl-shaped base reminiscent of India's first Buddhist stupa at Sanchi. At the top of this mound the superstructure, surrounded by lotus petals, begins. The curvilinear, four-sided spire resembles an elongated lotus bud and is said to symbolize growth of a lotus from a seed in a muddy lake bottom to a bloom over the lake's surface, a metaphor for human advancement from ignorance to enlightenment in Buddhism. The stupa is crowned by a stylized banana flower and parasol; the entire structure that was re-gilded in 1995.



Lao National Museum - Vientiane

While walking around the perfectly square monument, each different angle gives you a different view. The sun plays a game of sunrays and shadows. It almost feels like a light show being played before your eye.

An adjacent Wat has an incredible ceiling decorated with scenes from the life of Buddha.

Most of the temples and other attractions close from 12:00 to 13:00 and as it is now 12:15 we head to the market to wander through the stalls of goods ranging from traditional Lao textiles to sophisticated electronic goods.

Despite the vast array of goods there are very few customers.

After half an hour it is time to make our way to Wat Si Muang, considered the home of the guardian spirit of Vientiane and houses the city pillar. This is a busy temple with people

receiving blessings from a monk and others worshipping before the Buddha images.

<http://asiaforvisitors.com/laos/vientiane/watmuang/index.html>

Perhaps the busiest temple in Vientiane is Wat Si Muang. The temple is near the eastern entrance to the city center, on the road leading from the Friendship Bridge, and so is heavily frequented by visitors coming to the city, seeking good luck.

For all its popularity, Wat Si Muang is



The ruins of the Khmer shrine on which the temple was built.

rather a small temple. The *sim* (ordination hall) sits in a large paved yard that is often full of cars parked while the faithful pay a quick visit.

Inside, the *sim* is somewhat unusual in that it is divided into two rooms. Most Buddhist chapels are a single large room. The front room of the *sim* is rather spare, and there is usually a monk on hand to give blessings. The rear room houses the main altar, which takes up almost the entire room.

The altar is crowded with Buddha images, but pride of place at the top of the altar is taken by a rough gilded stone that is the city's original city pillar (*lak muang*), which actually extends deep into the ground under the altar. There is another city pillar now installed at the [Tat Luang](#) monument. Don't miss a look up at the intricately decorated copper colored ceiling.

The temple was built on the ruins of a Khmer Hindu shrine, the remains of which can be seen behind the ordination hall. The city pillar around which the *sim* was built may have been a stone pillar taken from this or another Khmer temple.



Statue of King Sisavang Vong in front of Wat Simuang.

On a wedge of land formed by the merging of two streets in front of the temple stands a huge statue of King Sisavang Vong. The French-installed King ruled over Laos from 1904 to 1959 during World War II and, somewhat independence after the war.

The statue holds a palm leaf manuscript supposed to represent the country's first legal code. Reluctantly, the country's There is no plaque identifying the statue. It was "lost" shortly after the 1975 revolution that toppled the old royalist government.



Cultural Centre - Vientiane

Wat Si Saket, the oldest temple in Vientiane. It was built in 1818 by King Anouvong and is in the early Siamese style. It survived the destruction of the city by the Siamese in 1828. The main hall and courtyard house hundreds of niches with small Buddha images in them. However I found more interesting the decaying wall paintings that are being damaged by rising damp and are in urgent need of restoration. The Wat is considered a museum of Buddhist art.

<http://www.asiaexplorers.com/laos/vientiane/watsisaket.htm>

Wat Si Saket was built by Chao Anuvong, the last king of the Lan Xang Kingdom, in 1818 in the early Bangkok style, when

Laos was a vassal of Siam. Probably due to its architectural style, when the Siamese attacked and destroyed Vientiane in 1828, Wat Si Saket was relatively spared, making it the oldest original temple in Vientiane today.



Black Stupa - Vientiane

What makes Wat Si Saket particularly attractive among tourists today is the cloister that surrounds the central *sim*, or ordination hall. The interior walls contain small niches that house tiny silver and

ceramic Buddha images, over 2000 all told. These Buddha images were made in Vientiane between the 16th and 19th Centuries. Sitting on long shelves below the niches are over 300 mostly Lao-style Buddhas. They are made of wood, stone and bronze.

On the western side of the cloister is a pile of broken images, the result of the Siamese-Laotian war of 1828. Today Wat Si Saket is home to the head of the Lao sangha, the Buddhist order of monks.

Across the road is Haw Phra Kaew. King Setthathirat built this former royal temple in 1565 to house the Emerald Buddha, and as his personal place of worship. For this reason there were never any monks in residence. Now it is a museum.

The temple housed the [Emerald Buddha](#) figurine, which Setthathirath had brought from [Chiang Mai](#), then the capital of [Lanna](#), to [Luang Prabang](#). When Vientiane was seized by Siam (now [Thailand](#)) in 1778, the figurine was taken to [Thonburi](#). It now resides in [Wat Phra Kaew, Bangkok](#).

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Haw_Phra_Kaew

The Black Stupa is a large, old brick stupa that has lost most of its rendering. It sits in the middle of a square, surrounded by houses and shops. As far as I could see there was no explanatory sign to tell anyone its significance or date of construction.

http://www.mytravelguide.com/attractions/profile-79631605-Laos_Vientiane_That_Dam_Black_Stupa_.html

This historic statue is said to be built on the cave of a dormant seven-headed dragon which rose to the rescue of the Vientiane population in the 1828 war with Thailand. Now standing guard over the town's center, the imposing and mysterious stupa is overgrown with moss and the black spire creates an ominous impression against the blue sky. Legends aside, it is a curious and fascinating sight in Asia where all that is precious normally glitters in gold. The old black stone feeds your imagination evoking bygone eras and ghosts from the past.



Square near the hotel - Vientiane

My final stop is the Lao National Museum. The ground floor houses traditional museum exhibits, some natural history and archaeology.

Upstairs and later downstairs most of the exhibits are dedicated to the struggle for independence from foreign powers, particularly the French and the US during the Vietnam War culminating in victory by the Pathet Lao in 1975. The final ground floor exhibits chronicle the successes of the Government in modernising the country.

<http://www.culturalprofiles.net/laos/Units/159.html>

The largest of the country's 10 government-run museums, the Lao National Museum is housed in a rambling two-story colonial building on Thanon Samsenthai in central Vientiane. Originally constructed in 1925 as the *Hôtel du commissariat*, the building was badly damaged by war in 1945, but after restoration it became the offices of the Ministry of Defence and latterly of the Prime Minister of the Royal Lao Government (RLG). From 1975-1980 the

building served as the headquarters of the Irrigation Department of the Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries, but in 1980, on the fifth anniversary of the establishment of the Lao PDR, it was turned into the Lao Revolutionary Exhibition Hall, a permanent display of artefacts, photographs and documents relating to the fight for independence and revolution. In 1985, in celebration of the 10th anniversary of the Lao PDR, it was upgraded to become the Lao Revolutionary Museum. In early 2000 it was re-established as the Lao National Museum, with a new directive to present the entire prehistory and history of the Lao nation. The current objectives of the Lao National Museum are to collect artefacts that better represent the phases of Lao history prior to French colonisation in 1893 and to make its exhibits more comprehensible and interesting to both Lao and foreign visitors. It comprises a number of exhibition halls, each with their own theme. These focus on Lao prehistory and the major dinosaur bone discoveries in Savannakhet; early civilisations; the indianised Mon and Khmer kingdoms during the first millennium CE; ethnic diversity; the history of the Lao kingdom of Lane Xang up to 1707; the division of Lane Xang into three principalities 1707-1779; the rule of Siam 1779-1893; the French colonial period 1893-1945; the first Indochina War 1945-1954; US intervention 1964-1973; the successful liberation of the country in 1975; and the period of national development since 1975. The museum incorporates a souvenir shop and a

small gallery of paintings by local artists. It receives some 60 visitors every day. Date updated: 29 April 2005

Finally I head for a beer on the banks of the Mekong River that has now become a wide shallow river.

Although Laos has only been open to tourists since 2000 the quality of the infrastructure seems to be quite good. Tourism is also clearly having a major impact on the towns we have visited.



Bars on the banks of the Mekong River - Vientiane

Thursday 8th March 2007 - Vientiane - Lak Sao

Day 13

A bus ride (approximately 7 hours) takes us along the mountains and limestone

karsts south and east to the border town of Lak Sao.

A relaxed departure time of 09:00 sees us on our way. We head east along Route 13 south along the Mekong River to

Pakkading at the junction of the Sanam River with the Mekong where we stop for lunch. The road is good and it is a pleasant drive through the countryside.

After lunch we continue on to the junction with Route 8 that will take us up into the mountains and our overnight stop at Lak Sao. The road is good, but winding, as we climb up and down the limestone mountains.

Along the way we make two stops.

The first is at Sala Viewpoint in the shadow of Phou Pha Mane the highest point in the north of Phou Hin Boun limestone forest where we spectacular views of the limestone forest.

Our second stop is at the Nam Theun Bridge. Here the villagers have aluminium 'bomb boats', relics of the Vietnam War. These boats are not the remains of bomb, jettisons extra fuel tanks jettisoned by B52 bombers during the Vietnam War.



Roadside food stall



Phou Hin Boun Limestone Forest - Sala Viewpoint

<http://www.north-by-north-east.com/companyinfo.asp>

<http://asiatours.net/thailand/tours/lao-eco.html>



'Bomb' Boats - Nam Theun Bridge



Market Stall - Lak Sao

Apart from a large market Lak Sao has little to offer except as a convenient overnight stop before heading to the border crossing at Nam Phao.

Our accommodation is comfortable. We eat at the Only One restaurant.

Today we leave early, at 07:00, for the long drive to Hanoi. We continue on through rugged mountain scenery and as we climb it starts to rain.



Ostentatious New House beside Highway 1

After about 45 minutes we reach the Lao border crossing at Nam khao. Formalities and money exchange are completed fairly quickly and we are soon on our way to the

Vietnamese border point at Cau Treo. Here things are different, It seems to take forever to process our entry and when our passports are returned to us a ' payment' of \$US1.00 is required. Our luggage is passed through an X-Ray machine, but no one is watching the machine.

There seems to be more officials than people seeking entry and most seem to be doing very little.

Finally we are through and walking through the light rain to our bus. No driver, so we are left standing in the rain for 15 minutes until Pauline telephones Hanoi and they telephone the driver to tell him we are waiting.

Having crossed the range it becomes immediately apparent that there is more rainfall and the fields are all green with new rice crop. The descent from the mountains is steep and the road is not as good as on the Lao side. The scenery is unfortunately obscured by the rain and mist but it is very rugged. This is Ho Chi Minh Trail country and it is little wonder the Americans were unable to close the trail.

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ho_Chi_Minh_Trail

<http://www.nautilus.org/VietnamFOIA/background/HoChiMinhTrail.html>

Vietnam

<http://www.geographia.com/vietnam/>

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vietnam>

Vietnam – History

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_Vietnam

<http://www.tosercohanai.com/webplus/viewer.asp?pgid=5&aid=128>

http://www.vietnamembassy-usa.org/learn_about_vietnam/history/



Traffic on Highway 1

Vietnam – Geography

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Geography_of_Vietnam

<http://www.tosercohanai.com/webplus/viewer.asp?pgid=5&ncid=45&aid=115>

We leave the mountains and enter the rural plains of Nghe An Province and soon after we reach Highway 1 we turn north

towards Hanoi. The road is good, but one lane each way is not enough for the mixture of buses, trucks, cars, motorbikes, bicycles and pedestrians and progress is slow. However we are at Vinh around midday for lunch. Vinh is a large bustling city.

New buildings are everywhere, reflecting growing prosperity and as we continue on to Hanoi we see many large and extravagant homes, newly completed or under construction. The 350km from Vinh to Hanoi takes almost 7 hours. It is almost 20:00 by the time we are in our rooms.

We dine at the KOTO restaurant and training school, a training restaurant for Hanoi kids, supported by the Intrepid Foundation. We have an excellent meal.

<http://www.theage.com.au/articles/2004/03/23/1079939629385.html>

<http://www.acil.com.au/documents%5Ckoto.pdf>

<http://www.streetvoices.com.au/>

Hanoi

Saturday 10th March 2007 - Hanoi

Day 15



Temple - West Lake - Hanoi



Misty Hanoi

Today is a free day and about 09:00 Que rings to arrange to pick me up at 11:15 for the day. I will go to stay with her tomorrow as we have the visit to the Water Puppets and the group farewell dinner.



Breakfast at Koto - Hanoi

Breakfast at Koto is included in the trip so we all head off at about 09:30 for the short walk in the light rain. It does not look a very promising day for sightseeing.

Another excellent meal, this time it is a buffet breakfast.



Temple - West Lake - Hanoi

Hans and Que arrive on time and as Mai is at Confirmation Class at the Cathedral and isn't to be collected until midday we go to an exhibition of Water Puppets by Chu Luong at the Viet Art Centre. The collection of over 1000 puppets is displayed in the settings of the traditional stories. The exhibition will move to the USA in April.

Lunch and a quiet afternoon exploring the nearby temples on the shores of West

Lake is a pleasant change from the last few days travel.



Water Puppet Exhibition - Hanoi



Water Puppet Exhibition - Hanoi

Hans returns me to the hotel in time to go to the Water Puppet Theatre. Having seen the show several times before I knew what to expect. As usual the theatre was full and the show was up to its usual standard but I am afraid most of our group found the show boring.



Water Puppet Exhibition - Hanoi



Temple Garden - West Lake - Hanoi

Dinner was at the Cyclo Bar and everyone had a good night out. The light rain has persisted for most of the day and continues as we make our way back to the hotel at about 23:30.

<http://www.traveltovietnam.com/Guide/HaNoi/Restaurants-Bars/Cyclo%20Bar/default.asp>



Musicians and Narrators - Water Puppet Theatre - Hanoi



4605 Puppets - Water Puppet Theatre - Hanoi



Puppets - Water Puppet Theatre - Hanoi



Puppets - Water Puppet Theatre - Hanoi

Things have certainly changed since my first trip to Hanoi about 10 or 11 years ago. The streetlights are on and there are people about. Then the streetlights were out and the only people on the streets were soldiers and policemen at this time of night.



Puppets - Water Puppet Theatre - Hanoi



Puppets - Water Puppet Theatre - Hanoi

Sunday 11th March 2007 – Hanoi

Day 16

Que and Hans arrive 09:45 to pick me up in time to attend the service at the Cua Bac Church. Quite a large congregation of

Vietnamese and Ex-Pats attended the Mass, in English.

excellent assortment of Vietnamese and European dishes was available.

After returning to the house to get Mai and Johann we returned to the Melia Hotel in the city centre of a buffet lunch. An

The rest of the afternoon was spent recuperating.

Monday 12th March 2007 – Hanoi

Day 17

Monday is a catch up day. Most of the day is spent working on the diary so that I will not have to spend too much time on this

section of it when I get home. By the end of the day I am able to send the notes for Weeks 1 and 2 off to everyone.

After dinner Que and I go for an hours walk around the lake.

Tuesday 13th March 2007 – Hanoi

Day 18

This morning I am going to the Museum of Ethnology and then onto the Army Museum. Plans were to take a taxi, but at the last minute I decide to accept Que' s offer of a ride on the back of the motor bike. Hanoi traffic is bad enough with the protection of a car body. The only rules seems to be that you keep roughly to the right and don' t stop for anything and certainly don' t look to see what is blowing its horn at you.



Fish Traps - Museum of Ethnology - Hanoi



Making Conical Hats from Latinia Leaves - Museum of Ethnology - Hanoi

Fortunately the traffic does not move fast and gaps seem to open if you make your intentions clear. After about 15 minutes we arrive at Que' s office and there I get a taxi to the museum.

<http://www.bluffton.edu/~sullivanm/vietnam/hanoi/ethnology/ethnology.html>



Ancestor's Shrine - Museum of Ethnology - Hanoi

Since Sue and I visited Museum of Ethnology a few years ago there have been a number of changes.

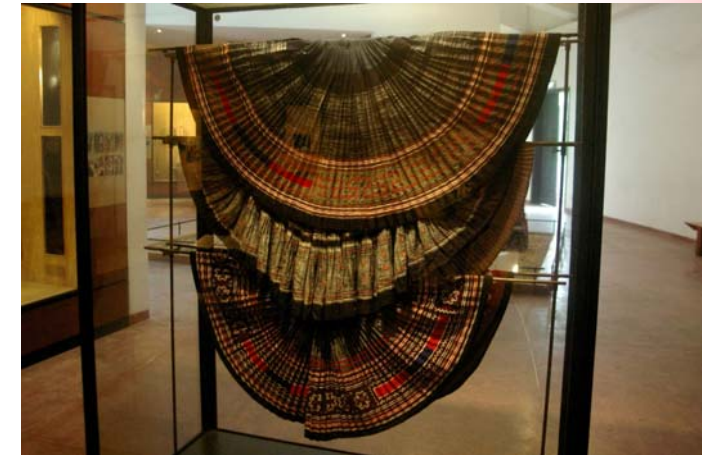
http://www.vme.org.vn/aboutus_history.asp



Rice Store - Subsidised Economy - Museum of Ethnology - Hanoi



Cramped Living - Subsidised Economy - Museum of Ethnology - Hanoi



Hmong Skirts - Museum of Ethnology - Hanoi



Iron Casting Tent of the Hmong - Museum of Ethnology - Hanoi

New displays about the subsidized rationing (Bao Cap economy) that was in place during and after the Vietnam War shows the hardships suffered by many as food and other supplies were short and often corruptly misappropriated.



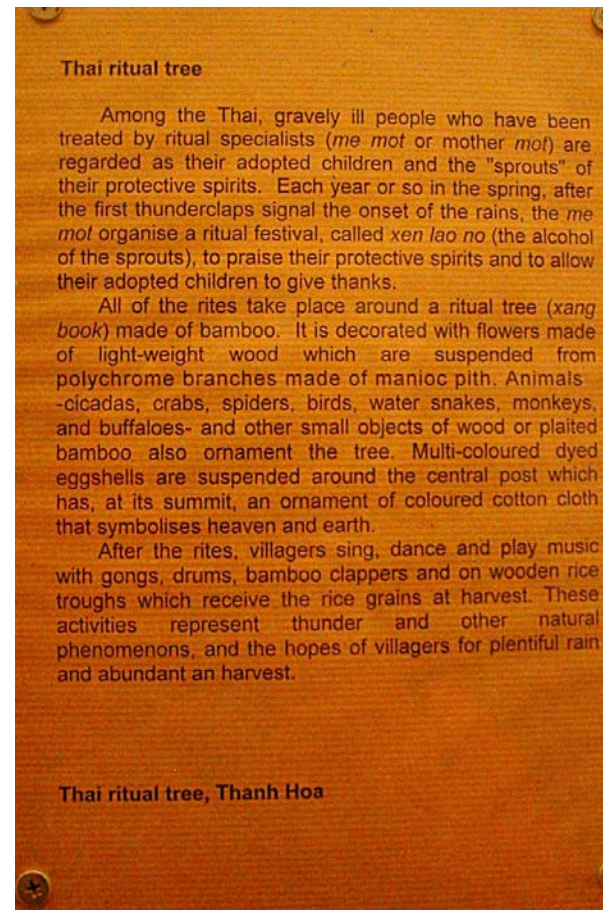
**Thai Ritual Tree - Museum of
Ethnology - Hanoi**

The exhibition is an admission that the policies failed it seems remarkable that the government is prepared to admit the failings. There is also a message that people are far better off under the present policies of doi moi and that of course the government is now on the right track. The plight of the people under the previous scheme is described in the words of some of the people who lived through it.

<http://www.ambhanoi.um.dk/en/menu/AboutUs/News/MuseumExhibitionDemonstratesVietnamsDevelopmentalProgress.htm?WBCMODE=Pres>

<http://vietnamnews.vnagency.com.vn/showarticle.php?num=01CUL160606>

http://www.breitbart.com/article.php?id=D8MUD1U80&show_article=1



Thai Ritual Tree - Museum of Ethnology - Hanoi

Thai Ritual Tree

<http://vietnamnews.vnagency.com.vn/showarticle.php?num=01CUL290706>



Giarai Tomb - Museum of Ethnology - Hanoi



Cua Bac Gate to the Ancient Citadel - Hanoi



**Bahnar Communal House - Museum of
Ethnology - Hanoi**



Cua Bac Church - Hanoi



Statue of Lenin - Hanoi



Flag Tower - Hanoi



In the Citadel - Hanoi

The other change is the establishment in the grounds of the museum of a number of houses characteristic of those used by minority groups. Most of these houses have been built by people from the ethnic minorities and have been sponsored by the government and foreign companies and countries.

When it is time to move on to the Army Museum, a motorbike seems the easiest way to get there and after negotiating a price we are off into the traffic again.

Unfortunately we arrive just as the museum is closing at 11:30 for lunch. It will reopen at 13:00. I decide to walk around the part of the Citadel that houses the Museum, but it takes some effort to persuade the motorbike riders that I want to walk this time. Eventually I get away and go looking for the parts of the Citadel that have recently opened to the public. I find them but they are also closed for lunch – until 14:00. OK I'll continue my walk, have lunch, visit the Army Museum and come back after 14:00.



Wrecked and Captured US Planes - Army Museum - Hanoi

The army museum is like many others, a collection of memorabilia from the army's campaigns and lots of photos of the heroes of these wars, particularly the wars of liberation against the French and Americans.

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vietnam_War

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Aircraft_losses_of_the_Vietnam_War

<http://www.slate.com/id/2111432/>



Captured French Mountain Gun - Army Museum - Hanoi

Besides a collection of tanks, planes etc that Vietnam used in those wars there are captured US and French arms and a pile of shot down US planes as the centerpiece.

After an hour I have finished and of course the motorbike riders are still waiting. I agree to have one take me back to the Citadel entrance. It is now closed permanently. I have no idea what was going on so I take a ride back to Que and Han's place.

No walk tonight I have walked far enough during the day.

Wednesday 14th March 2007 – Hanoi

Day 19

A quiet day working on the diary and in the evening a meeting of the Friends of Vietnam Heritage has a meeting with Bao Ninh, the author of The Sorrow of War. The novel is based on his ten years

experience in the North Vietnamese army up to the time of the fall of Saigon.

Reviews:

<http://inkpot.com/books/sorrow.html>

<http://ajp.psychiatryonline.org/cgi/content/full/157/12/2070>

<http://www.zmag.org/content/showarticle.cfm?ItemID=5339>

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bao_Ninh

Thursday 15th March 2007 - Hanoi

Day 20

A quiet day at home working on the photos for weeks one and two and now

most of the work for Bangkok to Hanoi is completed.

A long walk in the evening with Que can only be good for me.

Mai and Johann are attending the United Nations International School. This is a new school built on a green fields site and is expected to have around 1600 students.



4727 Mai on Stage - United Nations International School - Hanoi

UNIS was established through the support of the United Nations Development

Programme in Vietnam (UNDP) in 1988 as a non-profit organisation.



United Nations International School - Hanoi

The school relocated to its new, state of the art, custom-built campus in September 2004.

The curriculum is based on the International Baccalaureate (IB) Programme.

<http://www.unishanoi.org/>

This morning Mai's second grade at school is doing a presentation/performance at assembly based on de Bono's ideas of problem solving.



United Nations International School - Hanoi



Playing Fields - United Nations International School - Hanoi



The Magician - United Nations International School - Hanoi

The school has adopted Edward de Bono's concept of 'Six Thinking Hats' to aid learning and problem solving.

http://www.twbookmark.com/books/62/0316177911/chapter_excerpt9537.html
<http://www.edwdebono.com/debono/sths.htm>
http://www.valuebasedmanagement.net/methods_bono_six_thinking_hats.html
<http://members.optusnet.com.au/~charles57/Creative/Techniques/sixhats.htm>



Library - United Nations International School - Hanoi



Mai and other Blue Hat Rabbits - United Nations International School - Hanoi

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Six_Thinking_Hats

De Bono Hats



Yellow Hats - Global Warming - United Nations International School - Hanoi



Magician and Rabbits - United Nations International School - Hanoi

The de Bono Hats represent six thinking strategies, as identified by [Edward de Bono](#). He considered human cognition and thought to be of several types, approaches, or orientations. He theorized that of these approaches, most people used only one or two of the approaches and that people developed thinking

habits which in turn limited people to those approaches. de Bono believed that if the various approaches could be identified and a system of their use developed which could be taught, that people could be more productive in meetings and in collaborating within groups and teams by deliberately using the approaches.



4739 Magicians Assistant - United Nations International School - Hanoi

As a result of his investigations, de Bono was able to describe a process of deliberately adopting a particular approach

to a problem as an implementation of Parallel Thinking™ as well as an aid to [lateral thinking](#). Six different approaches are described, and each is [symbolised](#) by the act of putting on a coloured [hat](#), either actually or imaginatively. This he suggests can be done either by individuals working alone or in groups.



Rabbits - United Nations International School - Hanoi



Pianist - United Nations International School - Hanoi



A Dancing Rabbit - United Nations International School - Hanoi

The Red Hat represents Emotional thinking. The Yellow Hat represents Positive thinking. The Black Hat represents Critical thinking. The White Hat is purely the facts. The Green Hat is Creative thinking. The Blue Hat represents the Big Picture, sort of looking at it from all the viewpoints. These Thinking Hats have recently been incorporated in school business programs such as the [IBT](#) (International Business and Technology) program.

de Bono's Six Hats

- [White](#) hat (Blank sheet): Information & reports, facts and figures (*objective*)
- [Red](#) hat (Fire): Intuition, opinion & emotion, feelings (*subjective*)
- [Yellow](#) hat (Sun): Praise, positive aspects, why it will work (*objective*)

- [Black](#) hat (Judge's robe): Criticism, judgment, negative aspects, [modus tollens](#) (*objective*)
- [Green](#) hat (Plant): Alternatives, new approaches & 'everything goes', idea generation & provocations (*speculative/creative*)
- [Blue](#) hat (Sky): "Big Picture," "Conductor hat," "Meta hat," "thinking about thinking", overall process (*overview*)

Main Purposes of Use

- Focus and improve the thinking process
- Encourage creative, parallel and lateral thinking
- Improve communication
- Speed up decision making
- Avoid debate

One class has taken global warming as the theme.

Mai's class has the task of improving a magic show in which they are all performing rabbits wearing different coloured ears. The performances by the children are very confident and they all speak their lines very clearly.



Que - United Nations International School - Hanoi

Saturday 17th March 2007 - Hanoi

Day 22

There have been thunderstorms overnight and this morning it is still raining lightly, in fact there has been light rain most of the past week.

Not one to let me sit around for too long Que has organised a trip for me to the Phat Diem Stone Church.

Departure is at 07:00 from the Sofitel Plaza Hotel only a few kilometres away.

Phat Diem is about 130km to the south of Hanoi and so we head south on Highway 1 to Ninh Binh where we turn off. After another 30km on a very narrow road we reach Phat Diem. It has taken 3½ hours in light rain and light traffic.

Fortunately the rain stops as we arrive and although it is overcast our visit to this most unusual cathedral is not marred by rain.

Whilst the only strictly stone building is the Chapel of St Peter, there is extensive stonework in all the buildings.



Detail of Roof Beams - Museum - Stone Church - Phat Diem

<http://www.hanoitourist-travel.com/index.php?pc=tour&p=view&id=187&tid=67&zid=0>
<http://vietnamnews.vnnet.vn/2004-06/05/Stories/28.htm>
http://www.vietnamtourism.com/e_pages/country/province.asp?mt=8430&uid=1374



Father Sau - Founder of the Stone Church - Phat Diem



Carved Stone Screen - The Stone Church - Chapel of St Peter - Phat Diem



The Stone Church - Chapel of St Peter - Phat Diem

Phat Diem – amazing Catholic Church

<http://www.threeland.com/hanoi2.htm>

You may say a church is not your interest in a Far East country and thus you will be missing one of the most remarkable religious architectures in Vietnam. Phat Diem Church, a group of different churches of stone and wood, is the centre of Catholicism in Northern Vietnam and designed in Vietnamese style mixed harmoniously with the European Catholic traditions.

There's a grave on the ground of the church of Mr. Tran Luc, a local Catholic lived in late 19th century who designed the whole church without taking any official course of architecture and

paintings. Phat Diem Church is divided into two quarters: the churches and the clergy's house, which gradually completed in



1875 (the first Cavern built to test the subsidence of the area foundation), 1889 (the church of Saint Mary's Heart), 1891 (the Big Cathedral and the Belfry), and the Saints' shrines of Giuse, Phero and Rocco, all finished about 1898.



The Bishop - Cathedral - Stone Church - Phat Diem

The traditional architecture of Vietnam is recognized obviously in each ornament: the Belfry has curly tiled roof-tops with decoration of Vietnamese temples, the shrine of Jesus' Heart is made of

jackwood, the Big Cathedral is designed as a grandiose Communal House with sophisticated multi-level rafters, and all the churches are decorated with lotus, lemon flowers, birds, tropical trees like apricot and bamboo, and matched inscriptions in Chinese which are popular in Vietnamese Lunar New Year. The entire structure is admirable not only for the beauty of each fabric but for their amazingly unique co-ordination and is considered a pride of the contemporary folk works.

Phat Diem Catholic Church

September, 2006

http://www.pathfinder.com.vn/features/destinations/phat_diem_catholic_church/172/

Located only 130 kilometres from Hanoi, in the Kim Song district, Phat Diem Cathedral is different to St Paul's, to St Peter's, to Vatican City. The great old Catholic cathedrals and churches of the Old Countries and their colonies make less sense in Vietnam's rice paddies.



Phat Diem was built by a Vietnamese priest, Father Sau, and the local people he rallied to help, between the years 1875 and 1899. Father Sau died the

year it was completed. Unlike the other, European-built churches dotting the surrounding area, Phat Diem, with its pillars formed from whole trees, red lacquered altar and multi-tiered, curling roofs, is more Buddhist pagoda than Roman Catholic Cathedral. Dragons sit on the ornate stonework alongside more traditionally Christian symbols like angels and crosses.

The Cathedral itself is part of a larger complex of five smaller churches, artificial caves and an artificial lake and has changed little since Graham Greene visited so many years ago. There is also a two-tonne bell in the large bell tower. Though it was bombed in 1972 during the American War, destroying two of the chapels and causing the Cathedral to lean 20 degrees, restoration began immediately and the only damage visible today is the destruction of some of the intricate stone carvings.

Phat Diem is the centre of Catholicism in North Vietnam, and though Buddhism has a far longer, richer history in the country, the Catholic Church has been present for some 400 years.

Vietnam's Catholic history began with the Portuguese, much like Brazil. First came the Franciscans and later, the Jesuits, who came from missionary work in Macau, China. According to Church records, they converted over 50 000 Vietnamese in 20 years, and trained 40 Vietnamese clerics.

The French, over time, took control of the country from the Portuguese and became the dominant European power. It was a French Jesuit missionary, Alexandre de Rhodes, who first devised the quoc ngu script, based on Latin's written form.



Altar - The Stone Church - Chapel of St Peter - Phat Diem



Cathedral - Stone Church - Phat Diem



Bell - Stone Church - Phat Diem



Corner Tower - Bell Tower - Stone Church - Phat Diem



Cathedral - Stone Church - Phat Diem



Cathedral - Stone Church - Phat Diem



Bell Tower - Stone Church - Phat Diem

Phat Diem is much more than just a tourist site, though all visitors are welcome. Every Sunday locals walk or cycle to and from Mass, either at Phat Diem or other surrounding churches. And each year a spectacular and moving Midnight Mass is held, complete with brass band.



Street Scene - Phat Diem

Phat Diem is easy to get to. It's close to the historical city of Ninh Binh, which is on the main backpackers' bus route from Hanoi to Ho Chi Minh City, though few people get off at this stop. There is also a train line.

by: Georgie Appleby



Bell Tower - Stone Church - Phat Diem

After lunch we head back to Ninh Binh and then travel a short way south to the stonecutters village where the stones for the cathedral were cut. It is raining again, nevertheless we are all out of the bus to see these skilled craftsmen at work. These days angle grinders with diamond coated abrasive wheels make the work easier, but some of the finer work still requires the use of a hammer and chisel to shape the stone.

We drive back to Hanoi in the rain, arriving just after 18:00.

Hans and Que and I and the children dine out at a local Indian Restaurant – very good food.



Stonecutter at work

Hanoi to Hong Kong

Sunday 18th March 2007 – Hanoi

Day 23

This is my last day with Que and Hans.

Around 09:30 Que, Hans and I head into the city to attend the service at the Cua Bac Church. After the

service I have a haircut before we return to the house to pick up Mai and Johann for lunch.



Que and Hans Home - Hanoi



Johann

Lunch is at Sen, a very popular Vietnamese Restaurant. A wide variety of traditional Vietnamese dishes are available from the buffet. Many of the dishes are being prepared at little stalls in the restaurant. The food is delicious and I undoubtedly ate too much.

After lunch it was time to finish packing and return to the Victory Hotel to join the Intrepid group travelling to Hong Kong.

At 18:00 we meet in the hotel foyer for the usual pre tour briefing. We are eight plus our leader Elinor. The others have also travelled to Hanoi from Bangkok via Laos.



Lunch at Sen Restaurant - Hanoi



Buffet - Sen Restaurant - Hanoi

After the meeting we adjourn to the Quan Bia Minh Restaurant for a Vietnamese Banquet.

The restaurant is not far from the hotel, however the taxi driver takes on a city tour. We finally arrive some time after the rest of the group.

Again the food is excellent.



Que and Mai



Sen Restaurant - Hanoi

First stop is breakfast at Foto where this morning there are several groups preparing for the day. We have a little time before we leave we have time for a quick visit to Ban Mieu Chinese Temple.



Ban Mieu Chinese Temple - Hanoi

At 09:30 we load the bus and head out of town across the Red River towards Haiphong. The changes since Sue and I

visited Halong Bay in 1997 are incredible.



Flower Sellers - Hanoi



Busy Market Street - Hanoi

The four-lane highway has been completed and is now flanked by new industrial complexes, including textile and shoe

factories, plastics and metal fabrication factories. Today the trip takes 2½ hours and we arrive at the ferry terminal with time to spare.



On the River - Haiphong

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Haiphong>

<http://www.vnviews.com/vietnam-travel-misc/haiphong/Haiphong-Portrait-of-a-Port-Town.php>

The ferry departs the crowded Port of Haiphong on time at 12:30 and we head down river destined for Cat Ba Island. The ferry is not crowded so we can spread ourselves out.

It takes almost 2 hours to clear the river and then we are in Halong Bay passing through the limestone karst islands that are everywhere.



Paint Pigment on Sale - Hanoi

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ha_Long_Bay
<http://halong.org.vn/details.asp?lan=en&id=536>

There is light misty rain shrouding many of the islands creating a rather ghostly atmosphere.

We arrive a Cat Ba at 15:00 and make our way to our hotel on the seafront. A front room provides a magnificent view of the harbour and the myriads of fishing boats,

large and small that are anchored there. The rain has cleared and although it is still overcast, the light is excellent for photos of the harbour. A short walk around town and the market fills in the time before a drink and dinner at the Green Mango Restaurant.



On the River - Haiphong



Harbour - Cat Ba



Harbour - Cat Ba



Fish - Market - Cat Ba

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cat_ba_island
<http://www.itczm.ait.ac.th/2viet.pdf>

Tomorrow we will all do our own thing to explore Cat Ba Island and the National Park.



Fishing Boat - Halong Bay



River Traffic - Haiphong



Port - Haiphong



Cat Ba

Today is free for us to choose from a variety of activities. Four of us elect to take a motorbike tour of the island, others a kayaking and some are going to the beach.



Cat Ba Harbour – Cat Ba Island



Inside Trung Tang Cave – Cat Ba Island



Exit Door – Trung Tang Cave – Cat Ba Island



Climbing Ngu Lam Peak – Cat Ba Island

It is cool and overcast and at 08:30 the motorbike riders are ready to leave. Our route takes us up through the centre of the island towards the Cat Ba National Park. My driver comments on the heavy passenger. Fair enough for a 125cc scooter climbing 6% grades.



View from the top – Ngu Lam Peak – Cat Ba Island



After the Climb – Ngu Lam Peak – Cat Ba Island

Our first stop is at a cave, Trung Tang cave that was setup as military hospital during the Vietnam War. With assistance from the Chinese the hospital was built between 1965 and 1969 inside a limestone mountain. An existing cave was enlarged and a hospital able to hold

140 people was built. The hospital rooms are on one floor. A large cinema area is on the second floor and on the top of the mountain is a third room which we could not see as it is still a Vietnamese Army post.



Rachel arriving at the Fish Restaurant - Cat Ba Island



Fishing - Fish Restaurant - Cat Ba Island

Continuing on we come to the Cat Ba National Park. Here we plan to climb to the top of Ngu Lam Peak 225m

above sea level. We can see the peak and the observation tower above us a 2km walk away.



Temple at Hien Hao - Cat Ba Island

The walk starts easily as we walk through village in the valley towards the base of the mountain. The limestone karst mountains rise straight out of the valley. There are no foothills so we start our climb up a long staircase which seems to go for ever. Finally we reach the top of the staircase and there is a brief respite while we climb steadily up a well marked path paved with concrete blocks. The feeling that the rest will be easy going is short lived. We are soon scrambling over rocks, climbing ladders and sliding about in the mud as we continue upward. Down coming groups give us a rest as we wait for them to pass. Eventually we reach the top which we have to ourselves as all the others and there were many of them have descended from the peak so we can climb the tower and enjoy the view. After 20 minutes or so we start down. My companions have just finished O-levels at school so they are about 20 years old and they

choose the steep way down. I take the regular path with the guide; it is steep enough for me.



Water Taxis - Cat Ba



Promenade - Cat Ba

We have a breather at the bottom and then we are off through the mountains to the ferry port and mangrove forests on the western side of the island. Large areas of the mangroves have been destroyed for fish and shrimp farms in this area.

We then make our way back through the village to our lunch stop at a nice little restaurant beside a fish farm. We are encouraged to fish, however we have little success, catching only one tiddler between us. Lunch of several Vietnamese dishes was very good.

Lunch over, and by now it is almost 14:00, we start back to town via the winding coast road. We make a stop at a small temple at Hien Hao and several stops to

photograph the spectacular scenery. We are back in the hotel around 15:00 and the main task is to get at least some of the mud out of our pants and of our boots. The trousers will probably need several washes before they are clean.

Across the road from the hotel are steps down to the water where small boats come to deliver and pickup goods and passengers to take them to the floating restaurants and boats anchored in the harbour. The

small boats, up to about 5m in length, are made by weaving a basket of bamboo and sealing it with tar or pitch. They are light and strong and the smaller ones are easily rowed and scoot about the harbour as taxis. The larger ones have small engines and are used for fishing and floating shops with all kinds of goods for the boat dwellers. At the end of the day it is very busy at the steps as people, including school children return to their homes on the water.

Wednesday 21st March 2007 – Halong Bay

Day 26

At 08:00 we are ready to leave for our Halong Bay cruise to Bai Chay. For some reason the mini bus is late. When it does arrive we squeeze in ourselves and our luggage and head for Ben Bao, a harbour on the eastern side of the Cat Ba Island. This port is used by the tourist boats heading north in Halong Bay as it avoids a long journey round a peninsula to the east of Cat Ba harbour.

There are many boats heading out into the bay and we are just one of them making our way past the colourful floating homes of the local people.



Scorpion and Snake Wines – Cat Ba

It is an overcast day with little prospect of sunshine and the islands are shrouded in haze so that those in the distance have a ghostly appearance and boats ahead are hidden in the haze. There are many small fishing boats.



Floating Homes – Halong Bay

Our first stop is Hang Sun Sot, a large cave inside one of the islands. This cave has been well set up for tourists. The stairs up to the entrance and then the walkway through the enormous

cavern are well constructed and easily traversed. As this area is now a UNESCO World Heritage area protection of the cave is important and signs and the pathway help to ensure that there is no further damage to the stalactites and stalagmites. Illumination in the cave enhanced the colour of the formations and is bright enough to permit photography without a flash.



Halong Bay

Returning from the cave we reboard the boat and head out into open water where

the engine is stopped and some swim in the green waters of the bay. The swimmers report the water is not too cold. Out of the water it is cool.



Halong Bay



Halong Bay

After about 20 minutes we get under way and head north. An early lunch is served so that we can have it before we reach Bai Chay at about 12:10.

Our bus to take us to Lang Son is waiting for us when we arrive at Bai Chay and we are on our way as soon as we are loaded.



Hang Sun Sot Cave - Halong Bay

The improvement to the roads since 1997, when I was last in this area, is unbelievable. Wide two lane roads with wide sealed shoulders for bicycles and motorbikes are everywhere and the highway going north is no longer a narrow potholed road, but a proper two lane road. While travel is still fairly slow due to the slower vehicles on the road it is comfortable.

After about two hours we make a stop at a workshop for disabled people at Sao Do. Their products are mainly sewn goods and some paintings. However there is also a large store selling Vietnamese jewellery, marble carvings, lacquer ware,

pottery and paintings. The quality of some of the items is very good.

After spending 45 minutes looking at, and buying, the goods on display we make our way back to the highway and continue northward.



Halong Bay

We have been travelling through river flood plains and rice fields. There are also many old, small brick kilns along the banks of some of the rivers.



Fishers - Halong Bay



Rachel - Halong Bay

As we approach Bac Ninh there are many large new factory complexes along the road. This is another area that is clearly going ahead, particularly in the clothing and footwear industries. There are also a number of large modern brickworks that are almost certainly more environmentally friendly the old, small ones.

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bac_Ninh_Province

At Bac Ninh we turn right and head toward Lang Son 94km further on. Soon we enter the province of Lang Son and immediately we climb into hilly country and agriculture is confined to valleys and some terraced sloping areas. Approaching Lang Son there is also many new factories.

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lang_Son

www.asia-planet.net/vietnam/langson.htm



Rice fields - Halong Bay

We are at the hotel at 17:45. Lang Son is a fairly large border town but apart from its importance as the crossing point to China, has very little going for it.

Lang Son Province

http://www.vietnamtourism.com/e_pages/Tourist/destination.asp?mt=8425&uid=1230

We are up early again for, breakfast and a 08:00 departure for the Friendship Gate border crossing into China only 18km from Lang Son. It is raining and visibility is poor. Our journey takes about 30minutes and we are soon in the Vietnamese border control post having our exit processed. The usual waiting around while several people record our departure and stamp our passports. No bribe this time but before we finally depart Vietnam there is a 3000dong (\$US2) departure tax to pay. Customs is pretty straightforward I am first through and I hand my departure form to the Customs officer and walk through with all my baggage, everyone else has to have their bags X-Rayed.

China – History

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_China

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Timeline_of_Chinese_history

<http://www.muztagh.com/china-history/index.html>

<http://www-chaos.umd.edu/history/> (A comprehensive history page)

<http://www-chaos.umd.edu/history/toc.html>

http://www.china-travel-golden-route.com/history_of_China.html



Cabin – Huashan Hotel

Finally we are able to walk across the border and enter the grand, new Chinese border post. Here our greatest delay is filling in our entry and health forms. This done we are quickly processed by one officer and walk through the green line for customs and on to the Friendship Gate and our bus to Hua Shan.

We are now in Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region, a part of China that is populated mainly by minority people.



Lunch – Huashan Hotel

China - Ethnic Minorities

Dong

<http://library.thinkquest.org/05aug/01780/chinese-ethnic-group/dong.htm>

<http://www.travelchinaguide.com/intro/nationality/dong/index.htm>

Hui

<http://library.thinkquest.org/05aug/01780/chinese-ethnic-group/hui.htm>

<http://www.travelchinaguide.com/intro/nationality/hui/index.htm>

Miao (Mong, Hmong)

<http://library.thinkquest.org/05aug/01780/chinese-ethnic-group/miao.htm>
<http://www.travelchinaguide.com/intro/nationality/miao/index.htm>



**Bamboo beside the Mingjiang River
Yao**

<http://library.thinkquest.org/05aug/01780/chinese-ethnic-group/yao.htm>

<http://www.travelchinaguide.com/intro/nationality/yao/index.htm>

Zhuang

<http://library.thinkquest.org/05aug/01780/chinese-ethnic-group/zhuang.htm>
<http://www.travelchinaguide.com/intro/nationality/zhuang/index.htm>



Swimming Pool - Huashan Hotel

As we leave the border post enter a 4-lane divided highway that is not cluttered with all sorts of slow vehicles at last for the first time since leaving Bangkok we are at travelling at real highway speeds. After passing the border town of Pinxiang we turn off toward Ning Ming on a secondary road along which we are still able to travel at good speed. We are still travelling through valleys surrounded by limestone karst mountains. Vegetables and rice are the common crops in the valley and there is

increasing evidence of sugar cane although it is difficult to see through the misty rain.



Huashan cliff Paintings



Huashan cliff Paintings

Our journey to Ning Ming takes about an hour and it is here that we see signs that a major crop is sugar. A sugar mill is receiving cane for crushing and there are long lines of trucks

waiting to deliver the newly harvested cane. Another 20 minutes and we are at our hotel in a rural hamlet near Hua Shan. Our rooms are small cabins at the foot of a mountain that towers behind us.

The Hua Shan hotel was developed as a small holiday resort with a large swimming pool and a camping area. At the moment the camp and pool are fairly desolate; perhaps in the summer things are better.

Our hosts have prepared a delicious Chinese lunch.

After lunch we take a boat on the Mingjiang River to the Huashan cliff paintings believed to have been painted by Zhuang people between 1800 and 2000 years ago. The paintings are on a cliff face 260m high by 250m wide and are 44m high and about 40m above the river. It is not known how the artists managed to paint the pictures so far up the rock face.

The cliff overhangs and is believed to have protected the paintings from the weather.

There are over 60 sites featuring these paintings.

<http://www.kepu.net.cn/english/nationalitymse/zhu/200312240080.html>

The main subjects of Huashan fresco are human beings, animals and instruments, listed in the descending order. Human figures are front-faced or sided, yet all with upright hands and bowing elbows, two parting feet in a half squat posture. The height ranges between 3 m to 30 cm. Animals are mostly dogs and as well as a small number of birds. Instruments include round-head knives, long swords, clocks, drums, bells, and masks, etc. The basic arrangement of a picture is like this: a high front-faced man carrying a sword on the waist in the middle, with other figures, animals, and utensils orderly around it. These frescos are painted but not drawn, therefore it is hard to distinguish the countenances; yet the lines are rugged, vigorous, simple but vivid. According to a relevant scientific assessment in 1986, these pictures appeared between the Spring and Autumn period, the Warring States and the Eastern

Han Dynasty. They are the valuable cultural heritage of Zhuang's ancestors Luoyue people.

<http://english.cri.cn/725/2005/10/09/202@23648.htm>

http://www.gxtravel.com/ReadArt.asp?Art_ID=279

The themes are similar in many ways to Australian Aboriginal Rock Art.



Mingjiang River

Friday 23rd March 2007 – Hua Shan - Liuzhou

Day 28

Our hosts prepared a breakfast of noodles, boiled eggs, pork dumplings and

steamed buns for us to set us up for a travel day.

We depart at 08:00 to return to Ning Ming to catch the local bus to Nanning where we will catch another bus to Liu Zhou.

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nanning>
<http://www.international-relations.com/cm4-1/Nanningwb.htm>

This proves to be some of the best road travel I have done on this trip; air-conditioned coaches travelling on four lane express ways that now crisscross China.

We are travelling through rural areas and it seems a little incongruous to be travelling on an expressway whilst in the fields alongside farmers are ploughing with buffalo. Tractors are rare and even the ubiquitous iron buffalo that is to be found all over India, Myanmar, Thailand, Laos and Vietnam seems to be absent.

In 1978 Sue and my mother visited this part of China and in particular Nanning. They predicted changes but I doubt they foresaw the scope and rate of change. Highways that are as good as any in the world and in Nanning, the capital of Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region the whole city seems to be being torn down as buildings are removed to build wide streets and modern high-rise apartments.

We arrive in Liu Zhou at about 15:00.

<http://www.china.org.cn/english/TCC/42346.htm>



Morning - Hua Shan

Liuzhou, located by the Liujiang River in the central part of the Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region, has convenient land and water communications and is a newly developing industrial city. It is rich in natural resources.

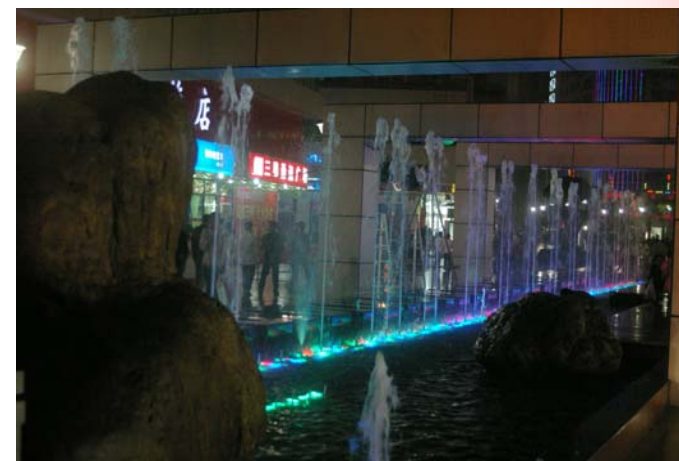
A legend says that during the Northern and Southern Dynasties (420-589), eight dragons emerged from the Liujiang River, and ever since the place has been called the "city of the Dragons."

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Liuzhou>
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Battle_of_Guilin-Liuzhou
<http://www.gxtravel.com/Culture/ReadIntroduction.asp?City=Liuzhou>
<http://www.gxtravel.com/Citys/ReadArt.asp?City=liuzhou>

The remaining afternoon is a chance to catch up on e-mails.



Downtown Liu Zhou



Fountain - Liu Zhou

This morning is an opportunity to catch up with some sleep as we are not leaving until 12:00 and try to send the week 4 notes to everyone and answer some of the emails that have come in the last few days.

A trip to the bank to change money also takes about half an hour so it is soon time to meet for the taxi ride to the bus station for the trip in a local bus to San Jiang (three rivers).

Last night, after a delicious dinner, we explored the 'walking streets' of Liu Zhou where there are modern shops filled with designer clothes, shoes, assorted electronic items and mobile phones.

There were many local people in the streets and the shops.

Our route out of town passes through the same area and this afternoon it is again very busy. We pass a number of attractive parks and some attractive, new, public buildings. As in Nanning there is

construction everywhere - new apartments and factory buildings.



Liuzhou

The weather is better today and it is possible to see the countryside as we head north. Again we are passing through limestone karst mountains set in fields of rice, sugar and vegetables. There are many brick kilns both small and large along the way.

At first houses in farms and villages are mainly block like structures of brick or concrete. As we travel north we enter hillier country and here the traditional houses are constructed of earth. They appear to be mud brick. New houses are of brick and concrete.



Wind and Rain Bridge - Chenyang



Chenyang

As we approach San Jiang we enter very hilly country and the area inhabited by the Dong minority group. The houses are now built of timber and are quite large. They are much more attractive than the simple brick and concrete houses.

<http://library.thinkquest.org/05aug/01780/chinese-ethnic-group/dong.htm>



Water Wheel - Chenyang

We arrive at San Jiang at about 16:30 after an interesting drive through the

countryside on a good quality road in a comfortable bus.

At San Jiang we transfer to small mini-buses for the 30minute ride along a river valley to Chengyang.

We pull up at the traditional Dong wind and rain bridge that crosses the Linxi River to guest our house on the bank of the river.



Planting rice for seedlings - Chenyang

We have a little time for a short walk along the riverbank to where a farmer is planting rice seeds to produce seedlings for later transplantation to the rice paddies. Two rice crops a year are possible here if seedling for the spring crop are available in early April. To assist rapid germination and growth of seeds planted at this time the beds are covered with plastic hot houses to warm the soil.



Guest House - Chenyang

Dong Wind and Rain Bridge

http://www.travelchinaguide.com/attraction/guangxi/sanjiang/wind_rain.htm

Dongzu has a long history; it has a culture, which is simple and glorious. The Dong people are passionate with strong feelings. Dong stockade villages are special and different from other places; most of the Dong stockade villages were built either side of rivers or brooks, and so people lived opposite each other across the water. Corridors and kiosks were built above the bridges; the bridges were not only used and still today for people passing but also to avoid the wind and rain. So they are called Wind and Rain Bridge.

San Jiang is located at the connecting point North of Guangxi, Hunan and Guizhou; it is an autonomous region mainly

consisting mainly of Dongzu, which makes up for more than 54% of the people of the whole of the county.

Although it itself is not very special, San Jiang has marvellous scenery in the Dong stockade villages. The most famous thing about San Jiang is the Chengyang Bridge so as to make it to be famous. Chengyang Bridge is constructed above the Linxi River of San Jiang County.

Chengyang Bridge is also called Yongji Bridge or Panlong Bridge. It was built in 1916, and it is the best one among the wind and rain bridges in Dong stockade villages. At present, it is the largest wind and rain bridge also it is the crystal of Dong people's wisdom; it is one of the artistic precious things of Chinese wood architectures.

This bridge is made of wood and stone, making it a large bridge stretching across the Linxi River, having 5 stone-made large columns. Fir and wood board cover the surface of the bridge. Moreover, the bridge is 64.4 meters long, 3.4 meters wide and 10.6 meters high.

Both sides of the bridge are inlaid with railing, so the whole bridge looks like a long corridor; in the bridge, there are 5 tower-like kiosks with many horns. The brims of the kiosks rise like stretching wings; the pilaster, tile brims and carved flower and pictures are magnificent.

The whole bridge is grand, like a brilliant rainbow, the most amazing thing in its construction is that no nails were used in the building of the whole bridge; pieces of wood in the bridge are closely jointed. Long stools were set up on both sides of the bridge for people to rest. From the stools where people sat you could see the Linxi River windingly flow; on both sides of the river it was full of tea forest and green woods on the sloping hills. Also you could see that the peasants were working in the plantations; there is also a reservoir on one side of the river.

A poem and the name of the bridge were engraved at one end of the bridge, they were written by one of the most famous poets of our country-Guo Moruo in 1965.

The unusual finished Wind and Rain Bridge, high and grand drum tower, the local houses with special styles, and the green hills and green water make up elegant pictures of traditions. Chengyang is not only famous for the wind and rain bridges, but also the Chengyang Eight Stockade Villages, which is the soul of Dongzu's culture.

On the hillsides beside the Chengyang Wind and Rain Bridge, there are many huge mill wheels; you can hear the voice of the slowly running non-stop water turning around the wheels. On the hillsides beside the river, there are many layers of Dong

Diaojiao Lou. By living here, you will feel the Dong's customs and Dong's local cultures.



Butcher - Chenyang



Moth - Chenyang

Our host prepare a delicious meal while we explore the river bank, particularly the large water wheels that raise water to channels leading to the paddy fields. Wheels are built of

bamboo poles and the wooden axles run in wooden bearings, others are of steel. Attached to the wheels are bamboo buckets angled so that when they reach

the top of the wheel they empty into the bamboo channel that carries the water to the fields. There is a large new bamboo wheel under construction opposite the hostel.

After dinner we stroll through the village, but it is getting dark and I will take another look tomorrow.

Sunday 25th March 2007 – Chengyang

Day 30

Early in the morning it is not raining and it looks like being a fine day but by 07:30 it has started to rain threatening our scheduled walk through the 5 nearby Dong villages. However by 09:30 the rain has eased and we set out on our walk with Tim (Lao Wu) the son of our host.

The villages cover quite a large area of hillsides with ponds, streams and fields in the valleys between. Each village has a drum tower which is also the community meeting place. It is also the place where old men gather to play cards and smoke. We are able to visit them all.

<http://www.travelchinaguide.com/attraction/guangxi/sanjiaang/mapang.htm>

There are several Wind and Rain Bridges spanning the streams allowing foot traffic to pass from village to village.



Chenyang



Cleaning Fish - Chenyang



Construction without Nails - Chenyang



Lunch with Mr Wu - Chenyang



Old Man and His Pipe - Chenyang

The houses are mostly timber two and three story buildings. Many were built with an open ground floor or with animal pens on the ground floor. Subsequently brick walls were built between the wooden poles supporting the buildings. In order to restore a more authentic look to the buildings the government is funding cladding of these walls with a planked timber veneer. In time this will weather to match the colour of the buildings, but at present this new timber stands out

everywhere in the villages and on some buildings it will never look authentic.



Drum Tower - Chenyang



Rice Paddy - Chenyang

The last Drum Tower we visit is large and has recently been rebuilt following a fire that destroyed it and several houses. Here a number of old men are smoking and playing cards and

welcome us with a cup of tea and an invitation to donate to the restoration fund and have our name inscribed on a stone tablet, all for a donation of 10 Yuan. The men are will to be photographed and I get some interesting pictures of them.



Iain, Rob, Fabian, Kaja, Christine, Rachel and Zak - Chenyang



Cultural Show - Chenyang

As it is approaching lunchtime we return to the hostel and as the weather has now cleared we shed our rain jackets and prepare for lunch. Most go to a café in the town that serves a range of good food and I go with them to have some coffee.



Dong Minority Girl - Chenyang

After we have eaten, most return to the hotel but I want to try for some better pictures in the better light. As I am walking slowly through the village our host at the hostel, Mr. Wu, virtually kidnaps me with

an invitation to a lunch with real Dong food. It was impossible to refuse.

He hustles me through the town to a house where we find about 20 men sitting down to a feast of local food and an unlimited supply of rice wine. It is about 14:30 and as we have an appointment at 15:30 to watch traditional Dong dancing there is not too much risk of becoming drunk on rice wine.



Fabian - Chenyang

Everyone is very friendly and most anxious that I should try all the dishes and participate in the rounds of toasts to one another with rice wine. The food was delicious, chicken's feet, pickled pork, and dried beef, duck that may have been smoked, chicken, pig's feet, corn and several other dishes I can't remember.

The toasting is potentially dangerous and one can become very drunk if one is not careful. Some one proposes a toast to you;

you exchange the small cups of wine whilst wishing each other good health and then down the wine in one go. With 6-8 men around the table each toasting all the others, sometimes more than once a lot of wine can be consumed.



Rob caught up in the Cultural Show - Chenyang

It was fortunate I had not eaten with the rest of the group and only had coffee otherwise I would have been unable to do justice to the food or my host's hospitality.

As we walked back to the performance in the town square, Mr. Wu ushered me into another house where a crowd of people were sitting down to a feast which was part of ongoing festivities for a recent wedding. Nobody seemed to mind my intrusion.

The dance performance was a little delayed as today was a festival day for everyone and some of the troupe were unavailable; it was said that some may have been too intoxicated to perform. Understandable, if the same amount of

wine was flowing at their functions was similar to that at the lunch I attended.

Nevertheless the dance and music performance was a spirited and colourful one ending with audience participation in a bamboo dance and a conga.

Monday 26th March 2007 – Chenyang – Lonji Rice Terraces

Day 31

This morning we take the same little buses back to San Jiang to continue our journey by local bus to Longsheng, and finally Ping' An in the heart of the Lonji Rice Terraces.

Before we depart Chenyang we need to pack daypacks for the next two nights as we will be trekking between two village on the Lonji rice terraces tomorrow.



River – San Jiang

From San Jiang the road to Longshen winds through the valley of the fast flowing Piaoli River. The valley is deep and scenic and we pass through a number of villages

along the way, stopping occasionally to set down or pick up local passengers.



Players in the Park – San Jiang

The road is being reconstructed and in some places realigned and as this is the rainy season there are many sections that are very rough and muddy. Other sections are quite good and where the work is completed the new concrete road is very good. Where the new road follows the route of the old road a 200mm thick slab of reinforced concrete has been laid on top of the old road.

Many small gravel dredges dredge stones and gravel from the riverbed for the concrete. The dredges sieve the gravel to remove the larger stones and return them to the river.



Fungi – Market – San Jiang

Local communities carry much of the work out and progress varies from village to village so that there are often gaps in the construction. Concrete is mixed on site. There are no concrete batching plants and trucks to carry concrete to the construction site.

When the road is complete the trip will be much quicker but today it takes about 2½ hours to reach Longshen.



Tools - Market - San Jiang



Yao Women - Lonji

We have about 35 minutes before the tourist bus to the rice terraces leaves so it is an opportunity for lunch and some photos of the busy market selling fresh fruit and vegetables, ducks, chickens and pigs.

The tourist bus also doubles as a local bus so it makes a number of stops. For us the most important one is at Heping where we leave most of our luggage in a hotel room. We will return in two days to collect it.



Traditional Construction - Lonji

We rejoin the bus and soon turn off the main road onto the mountain road winding up to the entrance to the Ping'an rice terraces. From here we have a half hour climb to our guesthouse in the village of Ping'an. The terraces are a popular tourist attraction for foreign and Chinese tourists and although this is the low season there are still plenty of tourists about to be harassed by the Yao women seeking payment to display their long black hair. Many of these women have hair to their ankles that they wind around their head and form a bun above their forehead. They cover most of their head with a black headscarf leaving only the bun exposed.

When we are settled our local guide, Farmer Tang, a diminutive live wire, leads us further up the mountain to

Viewpoint 2, where on a clear day we should get a good view of the terraces. Not so today, rain and mist obscure the view and we wait around for a while hoping for the mist to clear. No such luck, so we descend to the guesthouse.

On the way up I pay an exorbitant 30 Yuan for pictures of three girls dressed in traditional Yao, Miao, and Zhuang costumes.



Girls in Traditional Finery - Lonji

Late in the day the weather does clear and some make the climb again and get a brief view of the terraces.

Rice is grown on the terrace at altitudes between 300 and 1100m.

Dragon's Backbone Rice Terraces :

<http://www.travelchinaguide.com/attraction/guangxi/longsheng/dragon.htm>

Located approximately 27 kilometres (about 16 miles) southeast of [Longsheng](#) County, a vast region of rice terraces stretches layer upon layer, coiling around from the base of Lonji (the dragon's backbone) Mountain to its summit. This is the most amazing terrace in China, the Dragon's Backbone Rice Terraces. Construction of the terraces began in the Yuan Dynasty (1271-1368), and continued until the early Qing Dynasty (1644-1911) when construction was completed. The Dragon's Backbone Rice Terraces are the culmination of both the

profound wisdom and strenuous labour of the [Zhuang](#) people.

Now, the Dragon's Backbone Rice Terraces covers an area of 66 square kilometers (about 16308 acres) and spans an altitude between 300 meters (about 984 feet) and 1100 meters (about 3608 feet). It is said, 'Where there is soil, there is a terrace', be it in the valley, with swift flowing river to the mountains summit with its swirling cloud cover, or from bordering verdant forest to the cliff walls. Even though the Dragon's Backbone Rice Terraces is large, it is made up of numerous patches no

more than 1 mu (it is a traditional unit of area in China, currently call shimu) (about 0.16 acres). The smaller ones like snails while the bigger one like towers. The outline is very smooth with gradients between 26 degrees and 35 degrees.

The terraces change with the seasons, from being filled with pure water from the mountains, to green during the growing season and then golden-coloured when the rice is ready to be harvested, to a glistening white blanket of snow in winter.

Tuesday 27th March 2007 – Lonji

Day 32



Farmer Tang leads the way - Lonji



Farmer Tang - Lonji

The start to the day is fairly relaxed and we set out on our 6 hour trek at 10:30. By this time much of the morning fog has cleared and although it is overcast the views are good and we start the walk by climbing to Viewpoint 2 where we now have a good view of the Ping'an Terraces below us.

After our initial climb to Viewpoint 2 the walk to Viewpoint 1 is fairly easy going, generally following the contours of the terraces. Local women wanting to give us

a hair show or sell us some of their handicrafts accompany us. Saying 'no thank you' becomes automatic after a while.



Houses - Ping'an



View from Viewpoint 2 - Lonji

From Viewpoint 1 to our lunch stop at Zhongliu Village we descend into several valleys and then climb out and over the ridge. The final climb to Zhongliu village is long and a long rest

for lunch is welcome. The lunch, in one of the village houses, is excellent.



Yao Women - Lonji



Rice Terraces - Lonji

When we have finished we are on our way again having been assured by Farmer Tang that that the rest of the way was easier

going, mainly down hill, and it was, except for one very long climb soon after we left Zhongliu village.



The Path Behind Us - Lonji

By the time we reach our destination at Zhuang Jie where we will spend the night it is about 16:30. We are now in the Jinkeng Terraces at the Northern end of the Lonji Rice Terraces.



Elinor and Yao Women - Lonji



Rice Terraces - Lonji



Ploughing a Terrace - Lonji

Farmer Tang takes some of the boys to a viewpoint overlooking the Terraces. My knees and legs have had enough climbing and descending for the day and I choose to relax with a cold beer.

This morning we are on our way by 08:30 to walk down into the valley to catch the bus back to Hipeng and collect out bags.

The downhill walk takes about 40 minutes.



Li River - Yangshuo

The road to Hipeng winds along the side of a deep river valley. The rushing river below us cascades over numerous small waterfalls. While the road is quite good it is subject to rock falls and land slides and at one point we had to stop while rocks were moved to let the bus through.

At Hipeng we change buses and return to the highway and soon leave the mountains and enter the plains of the <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Guilin>

Li River valley and the numerous limestone karst mountains that it contains.



Cormorant Fisherman - Yangshuo



West Street - Yangshuo

A bus change at Guilin and we are on our way again for Yanshuo.

There are a variety of activities along the way. Rice and vegetables crops and duck farms occupy almost all the flat land. There are many factories producing timber products, bricks, and various types of machinery. There are many new buildings, both residential and industrial.



Lake Reflections - Yangshuo

Guilin is a large city stretching along the Li River. Again there is construction everywhere.

<http://www.chinahighlights.com/guilin/index.htm>

<http://www.chinahighlights.com/guilin/history/index.htm>

<http://www.dragonair.com.tw/icms/servlet/template?series=16&article=58&lang=eng>

<http://www.china-travel-golden-route.com/Guilin.html>

Although the scenic area is frequently referred to as Guilin, it is at Yangshuo 66km away that the tourist activity occurs.

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Yangshuo>

<http://www.travelchinaguide.com/cityguides/guangxi/yangshuo/index.htm>



Karst Scenery - Li River



Lake Reflections - Yangshuo



Liu Gong



Fish Farms - Li River



Garden - Liu Gong



Dinner - Liu Gong

Again it is still the off season, but, Yangshuo is swarming with tourists and West Street and the river front are lined with shops, bars and restaurants catering to the tourists.

<http://www.chinatravel.com/china-travel-guides/china-attractions/china-top/li-river.shtml>

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lijiang_River

Dinner to night is in a small restaurant over looking the Li River in the village of Liu Gong. The village is about an hour by boat downstream from Yangshuo. As the river meanders past the massive limestone karsts every bend

brings a new vista of the magnificent scenery. We have some time to explore Liu Gong before dinner

After another excellent meal we return to our hotel by micro bus.

Thursday 29th March 2007 - Yangshuo

Day 34



Fisherman - Dragon River - Yangshuo

There is plenty to do and see in and around Yangshuo and today we have a bicycle tour of the local countryside.



Mountain View - Dragon River - Yangshuo

We set off at about 09:00 on mountain bikes, most of which could do with some maintenance, and plunge into the hectic local traffic. It is not too bad at this time but when we return it is much busier.

At first we ride along a well-made road past rice paddies and fields of vegetable. However we soon turn off onto an unsealed

road. Our first stop is beside the Dragon River. We continue on through the fields and villages. Several of the bikes have leaking tyres and regular stops are needed to pump the tyres up again.



Ploughing a Paddy Field - Yangshuo

Disaster strikes on this section. A punctured tyre puts one bike out of action. With a little rearrangement and one of the girls riding sidesaddle on the luggage carrier of the guide's bike we

are able to continue to Moon Hill. The feature of this karst is a hole right through it that can be reached by a flight of 800 steps. We are told there are plenty of slowly rising sections and that it is an easy climb. Wrong! The climb starts fairly easily and becomes progressively steeper. Although the sun is not shining it is quite warm (and humid).



Drink Vendor - Moon Hill

A drink seller who fans me as we climb the steps and insists I should take it easy

accompanies me. At the top I need a drink and she has the only supply so of course I pay about double the normal rate.



Moon Hill



View from Moon Hill

The views from the top are worth the climb.



Local Guide Preparing Lunch



Our Hostess is in the middle

After descending from Moon Hill, and with a replacement bike, we make our way to a small village built about 250 to 300 years ago during the Qing Dynasty, for lunch.



Qing Village Street - Yangshuo



Rafts on the Dragon River - Yangshuo

The houses in this village, including the wealthy were landowners house, were taken over by the Communists in 1949 and given to the peasants. The landowner's house is almost a ruin and the village is dying as young people leave.

After the lunch, cooked by our guide, Richard, in the home of an elderly lady we made our way back to town, arriving at about 14:30.



Riding past the Brick Works - Yangshuo

I take it easy for the rest of the afternoon; I have not been on a bike for so long for a long time so it is an opportunity to catch up on some emails.

We dine at a local restaurant and then settle down for a few drinks at a bar in West Street and watch the passing parade of tourists and locals trying to sell all sorts of souvenirs.

Friday 30th March 2007 - Yangshuo

Day 35

As the diary has got a little behind I spend most of the morning catching up with the last three days.

This finished about midday I go out to walk around Yangshuo, explore some of the

shops, particularly those selling Chinese paintings. I had already seen some interesting ones and I needed another look.

On Wednesday I had noticed the garden at the foot of Green Lotus Peak, a karst towering over Yangshuo beside the river so I return to have a look.

<http://www.travelchinaguide.com/attraction/guangxi/yangshuo/lotus.htm>

Green Lotus Peak (Bilian Peak) :



Dai - Green Lotus Peak - Yangshuo

Besides the lovely pink and white lotus blooms seen throughout China, there is also a green lotus flower. Legend has it that the Green Lotus Fairy used to live in Heaven but often felt caged in. One day she met with Chang Er, a Chinese fairy living on the moon, and asked her for help. Chang Er showed her sympathy for the Green Lotus Fairy. She turned the fairy into a piece of paper and took her out of the heavenly palace secretly to the Li River. One day, Nanji Xianweng (God of Longevity) traveled here and discovered

the green lotus. He planned to take it to the heavenly pool. The green lotus was very sad because she fell in love with the carp in the river. And she asked the carp to blot up the water of the Li River so as to stay forever with the carp. As a result, she was turned into a stone hill, which is now the present-day Green Lotus Peak, by the annoyed Nanji Xianweng. The annoyed Nanji Xianweng also changed the carp into what is known today as the Carp Shoal.



Garden - Green Lotus Peak - Yangshuo

Green Lotus Peak (Bilian Peak), whose original name was Jian (mirror) Shan, is on the west bank of Li River, southeast of Yangshuo County. A landmark of the county, the peak resembles a budding lotus bloom in contrast to the other peaks found in the area.

Found near the peak are many pavilions, moya (stone characters/statues carved on cliffs) and steles. Most impressive and famous of all is the Chinese character 'dai' written in

[cursive script](#). In Chinese, the words 'area' and 'generation' are both pronounced 'dai'. Therefore, the 'dai' on the cliff has a dual meaning, both referring to the beautiful scenic area and indicating the young generation. The word is about 6 meters (19.7 feet) high and 3 meters (9.7 feet) wide and is composed of eight Chinese characters: yi dai shan he, shao nian nu li which translate into a message that states 'the young generation should maintain the beauty of the area and work hard to contribute to the country'.



Garden - Green Lotus Peak - Yangshuo

The Buddhist Missionary Jian Zhen visited here. After 5 attempts to travel by boat to Japan he finally made it in 753.

http://www.mountainsongs.net/template_.php?id=602



**Explanation of Dai - Green Lotus Peak
- Yangshuo**

Story of the Calligraphy Word, Dai.

The word was written during the Qing Dynasty in 1834 by Yangshuo mayor Mr Wang Yuanren whose nickname is Jingshan. He was originally from Shanyin, Zhejiang province. He was a descendent of the great calligraphist, Wang Xizhi. The carved word here is 5.732m high and 2.91m wide. It covers an area of 18m² on the rock. This word is a great art because

it indicates rich meaning. It seems normal at first glance. If you study it carefully, you will find a poem in ONE WORD. The poem says - How beautiful the landscape here! We should study the work hard when we are young. Moreover since the carver failed to read Mr Wang's nickname, Jingshan properly, the signed name was carved upside down by him. Now the stele has been preserved as an important historical relic in Yangshuo since 1981.

Signboard



Stone and Bonsai Garden - Green Lotus Peak - Yangshuo

After visiting the very relaxing garden and watching, block printing, bamboo papermaking and visiting the art gallery I returned to the hurly burly of the streets and continued to look at paintings.

I finally came upon a set of four depicting the four seasons that I liked and bought. I have posted them home, as although they

are not large the package is too large to carry for another month.



Buddhist Temple - Green Lotus Peak - Yangshuo



**Bamboo Paper making Demo - Green Lotus Peak -
Yangshuo**

At 17:30 we leave Yangshuo by bus to sleeper train at 20:00 for Shenzhen and Hong Kong. More of <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shenzhen>
travel to Guilin to catch the overnight that trip tomorrow!

Saturday 31st March 2007 - Hong Kong

Day 36

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hong_Kong
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stanley,_Hong_Kong

The overnight train from Guilin departed on time last night. Our bunks in the hard

sleeper class were reasonably comfortable but the cabin, for six people and open to the corridor, was rather cramped. Fold down seats in the corridor helped but they were not suitable for long distance travel. The trip would not have been too bad if the train had run to schedule and reached Shenzhen on time at 11:30. We were 4 hours late arriving in Shenzhen and

consequently our late arrival in Hong Kong severely limited sightseeing for those who were leaving on Sunday.

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