

STORIES : CHINA

Dec-18-'02

After the obligated 4-night stopover in Bangkok, what I can easily call as my second home after dozens of previous visits, Finally I put feet on Chinese ground again. What impressed me immediately upon arrival, was the discipline of policemen and other official airport authorities. However, other people doesn't show much respect to a foreigner as I could experience the first day already.

When I went to the bank to change some dollars for local currency, the people who came after me, simply passed me by to be the first at the counter. Until I start speaking some non-understandable bla bla in Flemish, nobody knew what happened, but at least they made way for me.

Kunming, the capital of Yunnan province is not the kind of city which you should put as top-priority on your list, but it is the environment, the surrounding area which has attracted me to come to visit this part of China.



The 5 star Horizon Hotel (see picture) where I will spend the night is a strong example of high-tech expression and neon-illuminated signs with huge Chinese characters that decorated the facades of the hotel.

As the tonight's diner is included, I made it to the rooftop revolving restaurant where a single table was waiting for me right next to the "bottom to top" glass wall.

The table offered me a splendid view over Kunming by night. The place was crowded by local earth creatures and one single white-faced foreigner.

No wonder, I felt a bit uncomfortable as all those yellow faces where looking in one direction only.

Normally when I arrive in a city for the first time, I usually want to check out what is going on at night. Tonight it was no difference, so I asked the Hotel concierge for "the place to be" of Kunming. He lifted his shoulders as he was trying to let me understand that there's nothing going on this part of the planet.

Ok, I went out the hotel and was trying to figure out where to go on my own. I usually ask Taxi drivers where to go... If they don't know, nobody knows... ! The friendly Chinese driver dropped me in front of a place called **TOP ONE**. I made my way inside and yes, it looks like this is the kind of place to my taste.

At this time, about 10.30pm the place was about as empty. There were tables and chairs available throughout this club but I was friendly advised to take a seat at the bar.

Promo girls representing Heineken and Sol are doing their best to offer me "their" beer. Because it has been a while since I had a Mexican beer, I ordered myself a "Sol". This to great enjoyment of the tiny clad promo-lady. (*picture this: A European guy drinking Mexican beer in China*).

As I was demanded to do so, I took a chair at the bar, from where I had a half-obstructed view to the dance floor so I thought it is ok.

As people started entering this sophisticated dance club, it was clear why I had to take place at the bar. Groups and parties of 3 or more could have a table while singles were friendly asked to sit down on the bar.

The place was already very crowded when two gorgeous Chinese chicks found their way next to my chair. They order one bottle of famous American beer and by the end of the night, they still shared that same bottle.

Anyway, one of them was really trying to get my eye catches on her and I have to admit that she succeeded in her target.

I started with a simple "hi, how are you?" but the answer was Chinese nonsense. There was no way of a conversation possible since she didn't spoke a single word of English,

neither did her friend. Myself I only knew "xién xién", which means thank you in Chinese. A few bottles of "Sol" later, we managed it to the dance floor and danced our asses off till the wee hours. It was remarkable to see how the Chinese are converting to westernised lifestyles on the dance floor.

Somewhat later when I tried to explain them that I had to catch a plane tomorrow, they were both making signs that they want to follow me to my hotel. The sweet ladies were inviting me for some "after dance pleasure". I told them how much I appreciated their invitation and called a taxi.

One of them gripped my hand, took a pen and wrote her mobile number in my hand palm....

I replied: "xién, xién". Welcome to China !!!

Dec-19-'02

A short flight delivered me at the amazing town of Guilin in the neighbouring province. Flying into the karsts landscape of Guilin is one of the most breathtaking approaches in China. The town is home to some 400.000 inhabitants. It is a town as thirteen in a dozen. However it is again the area around of the town that brought me here. There are numerous bizarre shaped hills and caves in this area. Nearby the centre of town, the world-renowned **Reed Flute Cave** attracts thousands of visitors from around the world daily. The cave goes some 240 metres into the mountain's tummy. The highlight of the cave is undoubtedly the **Crystal Palace of the Dragon King** and a subterranean water landscape, which resembles perfectly the landscape around Guilin and the Li River.

Autumn, my private guide who was waiting me at the airport upon arrival, did her very best to show me all her birthplace has to offer. At night she advised me to go either to visit a cultural performance or to the Chinese Circus. I asked her if she ever saw the Chinese Theatre ? Just to get to know which show would be best value for money. She nodded no. Considering the fact that I have been seeing a bunch of cultural shows of all sorts plus the fact that I perhaps would be able to see local minorities in their own living hood, I placed a bet for the Chinese Theatre. Asking Autumn if she would be able to join me inside, she answered that no tour guide could go inside free of charge. That was perhaps the reason why she was never able to see the show. To show off my good heart, I paid her the entrance ticket for the performance and inside we went.

What I saw here tonight has kept a very strong memory in my mind forever. Acrobats and artists of all ages brought such a spectacular performance that it was hard to believe that this is real. I have never watched such a magnificent show with stunts and acrobat that goes beyond your imagination.

If you ever have a change to watch a real Chinese Circus (don't misunderstand things – a Chinese Circus does not include animal acts, but world famous acrobats) just go to see it ! It will be printed inside your memory forever, I can tell.

I was tired tonight, but I'm not a type of a guy who wants to spend his hard earned dollars by watching CNN in the hotel room, so after the show, I planned to have a drink in the hotel bar where I met a Taiwanese lady. We have been sharing travel stories for a few hours, exchanged email addresses and we closed the place around 2.30am as the bar-tender has to kick us out.

Dec-20-'02



The boat trip on the **River Li**, or the **Li Jiang**, as my Chinese guide called the stream, which I have been programmed today will lead me to the cosy little town of **Yangshou** – an international meeting point for world travellers. The cruise between the ever changing landscape is truly a must on every China itinerary. The Li River has undergone an incredible development through tourism. The peaceful river goes winding and twisting past by the bizarre mountains that are scattered along the river banks. The river and the surrounding landscapes has inspired many Chinese painters and artists. The area has something mystique. Autumn, my local guide explains me about the region... The amazing karsts formations were forced up from the limestone seabed more than 300 million years ago. It reminds me on South Thailand and Halong Bay in Vietnam but this area is different from the others because its possibility to cruise the river which is like "a green silk belt, with the hills are like turquoise jade hairpins" (by Chinese poem Han Yu °768-834).

Earlier as planned because of the strong current today, the boat arrives in **Yangshou** where the tourist invasion already took place. Before I even step one foot on land, I was overwhelmed by kids acting as professional vendors, "Hello sil, postcalds ? Souvenil ?" After some elbow work, I could breath freely again.

West Street has indeed not stolen its name. It is the main street of the little town where one small eatery stands next to another cosy restaurant, all serving western goodies. Here no noodles or rice but pizzas, burgers and hot dogs available on every corner. I even noticed a Dutch menu signboard!

The hotel lobby of the **Yangshou Paradise Hotel** is fully decorated with large framed pictures of prominent guests who spend the night here. Richard Nixon, George Bush sr., Jimmy Carter, Bill Clinton and a number of prime ministers from every corner of the globe. I offered the front-desk manager my picture to be framed on the wall too but they refused it for some unknown reason.

Just to get the most of my short time here in Yangshou, I ordered a motorcycle with sidespan which is the most popular way of people-transportation in Yangshou to show us around.

The landscape around Yangshou is breathtakingly beautiful with quiet farms and small huts where people are living under worse circumstances but according to their ever smiling faces, always happy.

You need to be in good health and condition to climb up to the **Moon Hill** where you can enjoy a magnificent panoramic view of Yangshou and its surroundings.

That night I went out with Autumn as she wants to show me around West Street. We had diner together in a small cosy restaurant and for the first time since my stay in China, I could finally eat some westernised stuff again. Yet later, in another hang-out, I ordered a bottle of wine for the two of us which we emptied together next to to open fire of the bar. It was this night that my main upper button jumped off from my trouser. My tour guide who's eyes became even more tinier after the wine, claimed to me to get that button stitched back on my trouser. I refused it but she already ran to the bar front to request a needle and wire. 30 minutes later I would'nt have to worry of my trouser. Thank you Autumn !

Dec-21-'02

It was raining old wives when I arrived back in Guilin but a visit to the **Deer Flute Cave** (see picture) compensates everything. I've seen caves before in Indonesia, Malaysia,

Thailand, Barbados plus the world famous Grottoes of Han in Belgium and thought that I had enough caves for the next few years but this really is worth your visit. Inside the cave is illuminated with colourful spotlights and the music makes the whole thing even more mysterious.

Later that afternoon I had to say goodbye to Autumn, because I will return back to the City of eternal Spring - Kunming, I promise her to be back here one day. Usually I keep my promises - so check this website again later.

Celina, my private tour guide in Kunming is perfectly on schedule for me at the airport waiting again.

Dec-22-'02



Sunday morning 6.15am, I woke up to participate in the daily Chinese exercise program outside. Tai Chi is widely practised by young and old throughout the country. People of all social ranges are gathering together at one or another square. There's always a noisy speaker planted in the middle of the square, producing something which they call music in China. I noticed an older woman, practice Tai Chi by making movements with a large sword. About an hour later, the square is emptied, so everyone can start the day

at the office or factory at a relaxed (?) way.

The reason why I participated to Tai Chi is because we had quite a long drive to go today. Our destination: **Shilin**.

It has not been included in my program, but Celina recommends me to make a stop (at an extra cost of course) in the "just opened" **Jiu Xiang National Park**. Honestly spoken, it is worthwhile to stop. The park includes deep natural gorges where you're able to take a rowboat and sail smoothly over the silent water until you reach a large dam. Just across the dam, the water falls deep down into the entrance of a cave.

When standing outside, it is hard to believe that the **Quas** mountain is almost entirely hollow. Although you might get tired of seeing caves, do go to visit this one too.

Waterfalls, remarkable rock formations and other natural phenomena are changing at every corner. There's even an underground theatre and souvenir shops in the mountain's stomach.

On our way to Shilin, we make short stop at a typical village where the friendly Chinese rewards my visit with warm hospitality. Don't ask me the name of this small village but all I can tell is that there was not a single tourist in this place except me, and according to the people's interest, I guess there's seldom a white face in here who comes to visit them.

The first human I met when entering the village was an old woman who lived with her dog in a typical limestone house.

She wants me absolutely inside her home and wants to serve me tea. I tried to make her understand that I am on my way to Shilin, that I am limited with time, but there's no possible way of skipping her invitation. I can't refuse her invitation and sat down for a while. As I got our photo taken and showed her the result on the display of my digital camera, she get's very excited and wants the picture to be printed to hang in her home.

I promised her to send a copy.

Further in the village, I had a bunch of children following me at every step I took.

Because it is Sunday the local school is'nt open, but the local director rushed home to get the key to be able to show me around.



Whenever I have a change during my travels, I like to visit the local hospital. It is always an interesting place to see, with often interesting stories too. I've been visiting several remote villages in the world but the hospital here is one of the smallest I ever witnessed. There's one single wooden berth in the sand, one small cabin which contains some bottles and a small chair, same style as farmers were using 30 years ago in the westernised world, to milk their cows.

While I was walking under the sun inside the narrow alleys of the village, I realized where we westerners are living, in a welfare that can't seldom be compared to other nations although we are continuously complaining about peanuts, while the people here are living in peace and walking to the circle of life probably in a happier then we are doing back home.

The **Stone Forest** of Shilin, located some 120kms south of Kunming in the Autonomous District of Lunan of the Yi consists of narrow, bizarre shaped rock needles which are up to 30 metres in height. The Stone Forest goes back some 200 years in time, according my guide, when the earth crust rose and the waters from a lake receded. Some people can't get enough from the different rocks, while others finds it a waist of time.

To be honest, I had expected more from the park, but since it was on the way to my next destination - Vietnam - it was worth to stop but I would never include it as a prime destination. By the way, you'll find the last comfortable hotel here before you reach Sapa in North Vietnam, which is another full day by car to go.

Although the hotel seems to accommodate few guests, and there was'nt a hotel bar, the receptionists informed me that there are massage and sauna facilities on service for hotel guests.

Curious, and because there's not much going on in this place, I decided to check it out. The old elevator door slid open at the 4th floor. A traditionally dressed middle-aged woman, was waiting to guide me around the floor, to explain me about the hotel's possibilities. The first door she opened seemed to be a Karaoke place, without anybody inside. Of course not, because these are private rooms I figured out later. Next door, was the entrance to the massage table and sauna. Behind yet another door, my eyes opened widely as there were about twelve to fifteen teenaged Chinese girls, all wearing kimono's, and probably nothing more than that. They sat all together around a small table, playing cards. My host explained me that I can choose any girl which I would prefer to spend the night with. Although I was kinda boring this night, I friendly appreciated the offer, thank her for the guidance and I went back to my room... (alone).

Dec-23-'02

Today, it is going to be my last day in China, so I'll get up early at 6.20am again. Tonight I will cross the border to Vietnam. It is going to be a day which I will spend most of the time inside the car.

On my left side, I see the sunrise above a foggy landscape. On my right side I witness the sun colouring the mountain range into a perfect painting. The trip continues between rice fields, sugarcane plantings and valleys.

A little later I want to make a sanitary stop at a gasoline station. The people need to bend down above a hole in the ground to deliver their remains. Not that I saw this situation for the first time, but here there are three daggered holes next to one another in line, without any door or anything between them.

This way, up to three people are able to chat or gossip while they are doing their business. Inventive guys, those Chinese.

We forward our trip passing through villages where colourful clad ladies with their baby on their back, are working on the rice fields. Because of the communist regime, Chinese families are allowed to give birth to just one child, unless you're a minority. Who force the law will be punished.

Luckily for the men not the same way as in some African countries where they cut your hand by theft. High fines are the result when giving birth to a second baby. The formula is easy to understand. People with money can bare more children. Poor people are'nt able to extend their family.

As we are proceeding, sights are becoming more spectacular. Deep valleys, high mountain ranges dotted with small villages can be seen everywhere. Still further, we are driving directly into the centre of a small **Miao** minority village. Today it is market day. Vegetables, fruits, chickens and even live typical small horses are changing owner. People who usually lives up in the mountains, are coming down here once a week. Others who lives too far away can join-in on a truckload of people. On my way, I noticed a truck which back load was so crowdedly filled up with a bunch of colorful people that there where even humans hanging on the outside of the truckload.

It is about another hour to go to the checkpoint of the Chinese - Vietnamese border with the company of Celina, my private guide and Joe the driver. I can give them English names because it is hopeless to pronounce their real names.

Finally, after hours of never boring kilometres, we seems to get closer with **Hekou**, the last Chinese town before crossing the border. However, before we could arrive in town, there's a small border checkpoint some 10 kilometres in advance. The border control, existing of a fat Chinese woman and a lazy guy who did'nt wants to lift his ass up from a convenient seat, is claiming my passport. After some 20 minutes waiting in the car, the woman returned with my documents and saluted me...

The border closes for crossing at 5.30pm. It is about 4.45pm when I arrived in the centre of Hekou. In a hurry, I said goodbye to my guide and driver and entered the concrete construction.

No problem to leave China. Another stamp is placed in my passport, the barrier is lifted and I can cross the river. It is a strange feeling walking in the afternoon sun with my suitcase over the bridge, I turn back my head and realize behind me is China, ahead of me on the other side of the river Vietnam is waiting for me.

Two men who perhaps can't put a smile on their face, are sitting at the Vietnamese border of **Lao Cai**, the town where also the train from Hanoi arrives. The first guy is checking my passport and gives it to his colleague. This guy disappeared with my passport into a small office. After another 20 minutes of waiting, the man finally appears on the scene again, returns my passport to his colleague who seems to put his last blessing on it. -- Welcome to Vietnam !!!

I try to find my way to the chaotic world of people with conic straw hats, a mixture of smells which immediately reminds me on my last previous visit to the melting pot of Saigon.

My Vietnamese private guide for Sapa and the Tonkinese Alps, as the area is often called, is too late to pick me up from the border but I don't mind. I am on vacation. Minutes later, a minivan arrives on the intersection where I was sitting on top of my suitcase, as a way of protection. "Hello Mr. Eddy ?" - "Yes, that's me" - "Nice to meet you, my name is Huong" - "Nice to meet you too Huong" (where did I heard that name before ?). It is another 90 minutes to drive through fantastic natural scenery with high mountains and deep valleys. The road to Sapa is under construction. They are improving it because the expectation for tourism in this area is high. I immediately understand why.

On arrival in Sapa, I had a good feeling with the place. A small low-traffic town, easy to walk around, impossible to get lost and eateries for western tastes all over. Although, Vietnamese cuisine is very tasty and delicious. Sapa, at over 1000 meter height and a former French hill station has a special charm. Bustling with montagnards and set against breathtaking mountains, Sa Pa was a small Hmong tribal village until 1918 when a group of Jesuits established a now defunct order. Travel permits, for years the bane of tourists in Vietnam, were abolished in April 1993. Sa Pa has only been accessible to foreigners since and is all the fresher for it. inevitably, this will change as incomes have already quadrupled with the advent of tourism. Meanwhile, the Hmong do at least keep their

sense of humour. The articles they sell at the Sunday market will be their own. Try and spot the difference between what they wear on Saturday night and what is offered at the market the following morning.



The **Victoria Resort** is a hotel to my taste. Its location against a mountain range offers a splendid view over the town, even it has just three floors. As always, I like to check out the hotel's bar. It is a cosy establishment with an open fire. (Note: this season it is about 3-7 °C degrees at night) I take a comfortable stuffed seat in an discrete corner of the bar and order an Irish Coffee.

The lady behind the bar does'nt understood why I do not take a seat next to the open fire. I think by myself, yeah why not and I followed her advice. (picture)

When I took my camera to view some pictures on the display, the lady returns to me and request her picture taken with the Christmas tree. Again I followed her advice, took a few of her pictures and promised her to send the copies.

Today on Christmas evening, I planned to visit a local market. Not **Bac Ha** market since this is a very famous tourist-trip and thus very much commercialised to western wallets and tastes.

Hidden inside the jungle and unknown to most tourists, I prefer to take the bumpy three-hour jeep-ride, though it's only 80 kilometres, it takes over three hours to get to unspoiled **Coc Ly** market. The market is held once a week, only on Tuesday. When I was preparing my trip back home, I adjusted my itinerary to make sure I could attempt this market. Huong, my lovely lady from Exotissimo - Saigon had strongly advised me to include this in my trip. Now, finally I was ready to go to see what would be the absolute highlight of my entire *Asia winter 2002-2003* trip.

Generally, it's the **Flower Hmong** minority who colours the market, but there are also other minorities to be seen.

The jeep ride often goes on dusty paths, through emerald-green stepped hills and pine forests, and as we almost reached our destination, passing by brightly-dressed hill tribes on their way to the market. It's already nearly 11.00am as we arrive at Coc Ly market, according to Huong - my local guide - the best time to visit the market as it is prime time populated with minorities. Indeed it is very busy at the market. Embroidery, paper tissues, batteries, curiosity, fresh meat (in the heat of the sun) and even live donkeys are waiting to change owner.



However, I did'nt came here to do some business or shopping. I came to meet with the locals ! I try to get them in front of my camera and perhaps change some words with them. I can't get enough from this colourful scenery. Everywhere my eyes are looking, I see pure beauty set against a green backdrop of lush vegetation. Young ladies carrying their younger baby sister, smiling girls watching this stranger. I questioned myself, who is watching who ? They are watching me and I'm watching them. I walked the market about 4 times up and when it was time to leave, I

even returned once to the scene to catch a last glimpse as I realize, this trip will be deeply memorized forever, so better enjoy while you can. But time runs fast and it is time to go to another village. I decide to go back partly by boat on the river Cray. Also here, natural beauty in abundance. Sailing in this natural unspoiled gorge, with a talkative young female guide who is doing her best to make my life cheerful. It is not given to everyone. It is easy to use your imagination as we took our picnic lunch on board the small boat. Just a low-flying helicopter who could appear on the scene is missing in this setting to complete a real apocalypse backdrop.

We drop anchor at a small village where time seems to stood still 100 years ago. A local home is usually built from dried mud, while the roof is covered with banana leaves.

Nothing is visible here of the modern world. Not a single form of civilization, thus not a

single way of stress but just a relaxed atmosphere.

Local people kindly invited me inside to join a cup of tea. Of course I accept their hospitality and sat down in their "living room". Magazine posters and pictures decorates the wall and the only modern sign I observe, is a small portable battery-operated transistor radio, also hanging on the wall. The tea is prepared on open fire. To protect themselves from cold winter, the people invented a "hole in the wall" system that blow out the smoke away from the open fire. They even showed me their bedroom. Sometimes an entire family lives AND sleeps together in one single room. In this case, I noticed 4 double bamboo berths all together in one room.

It's Christmas night today and that is easily to be recognized back at the Victoria Resort. Specially the fare of compulsory Gala-dinner which puts a whole in my budget. 35++ US Dollar for a dinner is quite some bill for an average traveller. Usually, I spend Christmas with some company from the opposite sex, however not this time. While all the other guests, mainly French but I noticed Americans as well, are having dinner with their partners or family, I have a table for my own. I order a bottle of 25++ US dollar red wine to complete the night. It is Christmas ! Later when I request my bill, reminding myself to the people in the village. Will they realize it is Christmas today at all ???

Dec-25-'02

Again, I rise early to get the most out of my Sa Pa discovery. Even here on the other side of the globe, Santa Claus has'nt forgotten me ! A giant red Christmas sock, filled with candies, cookies and oranges is hanging on the outside of my room.

Today, Huong will give me her personal company for a hike which will last the entire day. The trek will leads us through rice fields and mountains, sometimes on muddy tracks and paths but she promised me that the hike will be rewarded with beautiful sights and sounds of the Black Hmong who inhabits the area.

In contrast to the people of Coc Ly market, this minority is mainly wearing black dresses, decorated with a silver coloured belt and big earrings.

The Black Hmong, living in the mountain village **Lao Chai** are known as the poorest minority in Vietnam and that's why education and public transport is free. Public transport means that non-minority people from Sa Pa, will often stop when they see Black Hmongs walking near the road to offer them a free ride.



When I entered the first village, I was kindly invited to a typical Black Hmong home. Inside, most women are chatting, while two ladies are busy with cooking rice in a giant pan from wich I guess its width to be about 1 meter.

Outside, a group of little black hang-tummy pigs starting to make some noise as soon they noticed my existence.

The locals, all of them together wanna be in the picture as soon as I opened my camera bag. There's no stopping possible anymore after I showed them the results on the camera's display. They want more... I promised by holy God to these people, to send a printed copy for each of them. The Black Hmong themselves does'nt have personal addresses, so I'll send them to Huong who will transfer them to the right people by a later visit.

Huong leads me over the slippery narrow rims of rice paddies. Once in a while I lost balance, got one of my western legs disappeared in the brown muddy mixture of soil and rice plants.

This results in hilarious situations, greatly appreciated by both local children and my tour guide. For Huong, this kind of treks are daily stuff and she almost "runs" over the

slippery rice field tracks.

While my legs are partly camouflaged similar colour as the rice fields, We continued through mud-paradise to the next village.

Although education is free, there are few children who are going to school. Later in the afternoon, this is confirmed when I brought a visit to the local school of Lao Chai. I observed just 5 kids at school. Most others are kept home by their parents to look after their younger brothers or sisters. For this reason, you will often see children carrying the entire day babies on their back. Tough job you might think ?

Somewhat later this afternoon, I met two teenaged girls who were on their way back to the village. Each girl has a woven basket on her back filled with fire-wood from the forest. I've been told that such a basket with wood will have a weight of approx. 20 kilograms.

My watch shows about 4.30 pm when I met these girls. They would arrive back home in their place around 6.00 pm. The two left to collect the wood in the forest in the morning !!! The entire day they are on their way with 20 kilograms of luggage on their back. In winter each day again ! Considering that I have been walking over slippery paths, swinging bamboo hang-bridges and muddy tracks, I definitely prefer to be a sales



A bit further, I heard some people playing instruments which did not sounded really as happy music. Curious as I am, I stepped closer to the home where the music came from.

Huong and myself are kindly requested to enter the home of the Hmong minority family. Huong informed me that this is a funeral, and that even herself, who often is in this area, never was invited to attempt a local funeral.

You can imagine that I can't ignore this 'once in a lifetime' opportunity and accept the invitation to enter the room.

There's a dark room with some 20 people circled in lotus position around one single candlelight.

The neighbouring room, where the mysterious music is played has attracted my attention and I bend myself to be able to enter the

low door opening.

Holding up by a few ropes, there's a kind of berth hanging at about eye-height level with on top a beautiful young girl which age I guess at about 8 years. She died the previous day during Christmas eve, after a long-term sickness. The two musicians are using a natural handmade bamboo flute and a drum.

My tour guide whispered in my ear that it would be a nice appreciation to give the family 5000 Dong (some 30 Euro cent or Dollar cents) as a way of donation.

I handed the young mother (I guess she's in her twenties) 15000 Dong or about 1 dollar in equivalent en let them continue to pray.

I realize that I was the only invited tourist inside their private ceremony as I later figured out that other visitors were kindly requested not to disturb the family.

The happening keeps spinning in my mind for the next few days and that night I have been dreaming about the poor little girl.

The trek goes on through lush vegetation and bamboo. Now and then, I can observe the magnificent deep valleys through the trees and jungle-foliage. The scenery is simply breathtakingly beautiful. Far down, I hear the river rushing, twisting a way through rocks and hills. Every now and then a hanging bridge to cross the valley.

The backdrop is a chain of mountains which tops are hidden in the clouds, which give the entire area even a bigger mysterious factor. Far away down, I can see small dots, homes which we visited earlier today.

That night after dinner, when I had to pay 138000 Dong for two alcoholic drinks at the hotel's lounge, I deeply regret myself that I didn't gave the family of the poor little girl who passed away, a few more dollars instead.

Exhausted from the long but rewarding day, I fall in a deep sleep...

Dec-26-'02

When I woke up, I hardly could keep my eyes open. Not because I need more sleep but it seems that I caught a serious cold yesterday. While returning from Lao Chai, the jeep-driver opened his window to get fresh air. Sweated from the trekking, it felt good to me too.

Not now anymore. My eyes are tearing as the Niagara Falls while my nose is running like a water pipe.

Today is my last day here in Sapa, this afternoon I will be brought back to Lao Cai station where I will board the **Victoria Express**.

Unfortunately, I have to cancel my last planned trip to **Hang Rong mountain** or even higher to **Fan Si Pan** (3143m).

From its summit you'll be able to have a panoramic view over the entire region, including Sapa and Tavan.

Because it is raining today, I decide wisely to save this trip till next visit, probably next year, because I love travelling in this region...

After a short interruption on the way to the train station due to a landslide resulting from the rainfall, I finally arrive in Lao Cai station where I get onboard the overnight train to Hanoi.

All doors are being locked for safety reasons, to protect from intruders while stopping at stations on the way.

Actually, the Victoria Express has two western-style priced carriages + a restaurant carriage.

I have to admit that the luxury of the train is much lower than my expectations. The sleeper cabin is rather small, although the airconditioning works perfect. Too perfect for a guy with a cold.

However the restaurant carriage is very nice with soft red-coloured seats. Tables covered with white cotton, fresh flowers on each table and clean silvery. (picture)



Normally the diner is at extra expenses but to me it was free for some reason. Because of the limited seats in the restaurant wagon, people are a bit pushed to rush their dinner as the second seating should take place around 10.00pm

Pity because the beers were cold and served by polite Vietnamese staff although 3 Dollars for a can is not particular cheap.

Once in bed, between snowy-white clean sheets, all you hear is the clinkety-clack from the wheels crossing the rails. This unusual sound will remain for 8 hours as the 380-km long journey from Sapa to Hanoi will last.

For most travellers the typical train clinkety-clack and gentle rolling will help to fall asleep, but I can't find my sleep and the 8 hours are passing by, being awake, shutting my eyes from time to time and reading something in between.

Although the train is scheduled to arrive by 6.30am in Hanoi, I decide to give it up, and I get dressed at 4.00am.

It is truly a fascinating sight to see hundreds of motorbike-headlights waiting at railway crossings. Getting closer to Hanoi, houses are built just meters away from the rail track and I am able to watch inside the people's home from my wagon.

This keeps me busy until we reach the end-station in the darkness a little earlier as expected.

Dreaming of the five-star Sofitel which has been booked for a night in Hanoi, I rush to have the first available taxi. That wasn't really needed as boys are waiting at the train station to help you with luggage.

Of course they expect a tipping for their service. If you have'nt a suitcase on wheels, it is value for money. The taxi driver delivered me to the Sofitel, but refused to drive up to

the front entrance. Immediately I noticed that he was trying to rip me off. At this time of the day, there's not a single human around, even at the five-star Sofitel. I demanded him to enter the curve up to the front door which he did. I stepped out the taxi and whistled loudly to attend the bellboy who was pitting at this time still. The taxi driver surprisingly opened his eyes wide but didn't say anything. He was trying to overcharge me about 6 times the regular fare from airport to here. He did not succeed in his matter...Goodnight, hmmm correction....have a nice day, I'll go to sleep for a few hours.

Dec-27-'02

Hanoi still looks the same as when I came here 7 years ago for the first time. It is a city that one might hate, while another might love it. Personally I prefer cosmopolitan places such as Saigon, Bangkok and Hong Kong instead.

Many travellers simply find it a waste of time being in a big city. To me, bigger cities have their own charm and have always attracted me. Few exceptions not mentioned, usually I spend 3 to 4 nights in a city before moving on. Here in Hanoi, I will just stay one night only but that has mainly to do because I was limited in time.

Still sick from the cold I caught in Sa Pa, I spend most time inside the hotel. It is winter and temperatures in Hanoi were not really nice. 7 years ago, I have been sweating even at night, now people were wearing gloves and shawls during the daytime. However, I didn't come on vacation to waste my precious time by watching CNN in the room or spending dollars at the hotel lounge. I decide to self-organise a walking tour to Hanoi's Old Quarter, after I visited the **West Lake**, located very near the Sofitel.



At the Old Quarter of Hanoi, it is amazing to see how shops selling the same goods are all located in the same lane. For example one road is lined with just shoe shops. Another has only households to offer while yet another road holds only pharmacies. Very convenient for the people who are looking for a precise item as they do not need to wander around the entire city to find the right stuff, but just go to one street.

Hanoi and Saigon are both famous for its outdoor barbers ! Don't be surprised to see a barber shaving a client's beard aside of a big road. It is a very common sight in Hanoi to see mirrors hanging on an outside wall, a chair being placed in front and a guy waiting for his clients.

There are of course notable sights scattered around Hanoi, most famous tourist attractions includes **Ho Chi Minh's Mausoleum**, the **One Pillar Pagoda**, and the **Hoa Kiem** lake. It is not my intention to go into detail on every tourist attraction here. There are plenty of travel guides available on the market. In places as Hanoi even copies for a fraction of the copyright version. Anyway, that night I just spent my time in the hotel which is very unusual to me, but I had to take care about myself. Tomorrow, I will depart for Saigon where the temperature might be some 25-30 C° degrees higher.

Dec-28-'02

Indeed it's hot in Saigon when I arrive in the oldest hotel of the city. The nostalgic colonial Majestic Hotel in the city centre's District 1 near the Saigon River, has a great history. That is the reason why I want to stay overnight here. I want to sample the grandeur from the old colonial days. I won't do much sightseeing this time since it is just one year ago that I explored Saigon intensively (read travel report South East Asia 2001-2002).

Saigon, or Ho Chi Minh City as the city officially is called these days, is excellent explored

on foot but there's one drawback - the traffic.

Hundreds of motorbikes are moving through the streets continuously throughout the day. Foreigners make a big mistake sometimes of thinking that the best way to cross a busy street in Vietnam is to run quickly across it. You should cross the street slowly; giving the motorbike drivers sufficient time to move their vehicles so that they can easily avoid you. I specially enjoy Saigon at night when the heat of the sun is gone. Dong Khoi Street, lined with shops and restaurants is the city's epicentre populated by French and other tourists. These days there's plenty of nightlife available in Saigon, although you will never know when the party ends. By law, no place is allowed to stay open later than midnight. However, during this visit I went a couple of times to the ever popular **Apocalypse Now** nightclub where they records kept spinning until 2.00am. The Apocalypse club is the most popular venue frequented by both locals and foreigners. I always had big fun here except from that night....

As usual, I made my way to the place at around 10.30pm to make sure I am still able to choose a good spot near the action. Today the crowd was waiting outside coz there was no action inside yet. I didn't care about it and walked inside to see why everyone is still outside. A few dozen people has come here for the same reason as i did and were waiting for the music to be opened.

On a remote table, in the quieter section of the club I saw three policemen in discussion with the owner of the place. Wondering what might be going on, I kindly asked the waitress when the music will be turned on. "Don't worry sir, the police will soon be gone" she answered my request. "How long might it takes still ?" I asked her. "15 to 20 minutes sir" - "wanna have a drink sir?" "Corona please" I replied.

In the mean time a few more policemen were arriving on the scene, completed with a truck and motorcycles. At around midnight, when I was about to leave the place, a policeman went behind the disco bar with the disc-jockey. They start to remove the music equipment. Amplifiers where carried outside and loaded into the police truck. As soon the police has departed, minutes later other equipment brought in from behind, assembled to the system and the sound boosted again through the speakers. Within 30 minutes the place was crowded again as the previous day and the party went on. Never before I experienced such an affection. Later I heard that there have been complaints from neighbours about the loud music, but the story goes about corruption and money matters. When the owner paid his "duty", he can continue... that's why he always has a second set of amplifiers ready to be installed immediately whenever his system would be confiscated.

Dec-29-'02

As a way of memory refreshment, today I wander around the city, partly by the popular cyclo - a three-wheeled vehicle - which is both an attractive but slow way to get around Ho Chi Minh City. Many of the drivers are former South Vietnamese army soldiers and speak at least basic English.

It is important to make a deal about the fare beforehand.

Prepare your money counted out and ready before getting on a cyclo. Drivers will sometimes claim they cannot change a 10000d note. It is better to pay the driver by time rather than distance. 1,5 US dollar p/hour is a typical price. Don't be surprised to see the driver again the next morning waiting in front of your hotel to see if you want to hire him again.

To see Ho Chi Minh City from the Saigon River, you might want to hire a motorized boat priced at about 7 US dollar per hour for a small boat. Interesting destinations by boat are Cholon - the Chinese district of the city or the zoo.

Other famous attractions in the city are the **War Crime Museum**, where numerous photographs can be seen, including photos from My Lai massacre. Outside the museum, in the yard there are several US armoured vehicles, artillery pieces, bombs and even a full-sized helicopter. The **Reunification Palace**, another reminder of the American war

where the first communist tanks in Saigon rushed on the morning of 30 April 1975 is another nice excursion. Other interesting sights are the **Phu An Hoi Quan Pagoda** in Cholon, the **Notre Dame Cathedral** and the colonial **Post office**.

Dec-30-'02

This time I want to celebrate New Year's Eve somewhat extraordinary. Therefore I decided to take a side trip to Cambodia's main attraction: **Angkor Wat**. Since long it has been listed as one of my "to see" places of the world. Finally today I'll be able to get there. I took off, early afternoon with a propeller airplane to **Siem Reap**, not so long ago occupied by the Red Khmer and inaccessible to foreigners.



These days, life is easygoing here although you'll be continuously confronted with living reminders of the genocide. I've never witnessed so many people, missing an arm or a leg, in such a small area (picture). This as a result from the thousands and thousands of landmines, still these days throughout Cambodia.

I have been warned not to go off the walking trails when visiting temples or other places. That in mind, I decided to make a short exploration of Siem Reap town after I'd checked in at the convenient **Angkoriana Hotel**. The '40-

USD a-night' hotel offers a spacious room with all the amenities as airconditioning, fridge, tv and so on. After I'd arranged a private guide and aircon car for the next three days, I charged a motorbike taxi to the nearby town for half a dollar.

Siem Reap is a typical world-travellers meeting point. Accommodation for all budgets, cold drinks and cheap but delicious food prepared for western mouths. Immediately I fell in love with this small sandy town. Although there's little nightlife to join-in, I was advised by another motor-driver to check out the **Martini club**, located across the river on the other side of the town. Although, few western faces where inside, I had lots of fun just sit and watch the locals dancing with their typical Asian movements - hands in the air, turning with there fingers getting around in a circle. It has to been said that the disc jockey, will play western music too. However, the biggest surprise came when I noticed two beer-promotion ladies. One of them was promoting Heineken beer -which is not uncommon of course- but the second girl wearing a miss-world alike strap around her waist and shoulder with "Stella Artois" on it ! A few years ago when I was in Taipei, I've seen a promotion seal of this Belgian beer. But here, remotely away from my country I can drink our own Belgian delicious beer ! That was such a surprise, that I rewarded the lady with some Stella's. A half-liter bottle arrives with the promo-lady who seems to be amazed to serve me. A table further away, I mentioned another group of about 5 or 6 young ladies who were contionuously staring at me. What I thought, it was for was later been confirmed as an older lady came to my table, offering female company for a drink to one of the girls. I was able to choose the one I wish for, to get her company and more services. I kindly thanked the woman, drank my glass empty and moved on.

Dec-31-'02

The best way to get your entry pass (40-usd for a three-day visit) to the **Temples of Angkor** is at the official entry booth on the road to Angkor Wat. Buying your entrance pass here, assures you that it is genuine and that the money is going to the right place. After your visit, it is best not to give your entrance pass to your taxi driver, guide or any other people. They will be re-sold to next tourist and are false, while the money disappears of course in the seller's pocket. By the way, the entrance pass is a great souvenir as dates of visit are being printed on it.



That being said, you need to have a passport-sized picture which will be sealed on your personal pass. Don't worry if you have'nt brought one. At the entrance booth, you'll be able to have an instant passport picture being taken at no extra charge.

Of course, the main attraction of Cambodia is without any doubt the great Angkor Wat, besides Angkor Thom (principally the Bayon) and Ta Phrom, which this last one was my favourite place.

Angkor Wat is the largest and most breathtaking of the monuments of Angkor. It rewards repeating visitors with previously unnoticed details. The average visitor is impressed by its grandeur and extensive bas-reliefs. The temple complex is surrounded by a moat, 190 meters wide, that forms a rectangle around it.

A bottle of water is probably your best investment since the sun is doing there best to provide you with a headache. Perhaps it is not a bad idea to bring along a hat. While the guide is explaining about every historical detail, which I don't really need to know, I am fascinated by the many stone-carved relief and wonder how people were able to staple these huge heavy concrete blocks on top of one another. The real method will remain history. Nobody seems to be able to answer my question.

After an intensive visit to Angkor Wat, we continued to our next stop, **The Bayon**, a collection of 54 gothic towers, decorated with over 200 smiling faces of **Avalokiteshvara**. While walking around, dozens of faces are visible at a time. Some at human-eye level, others peering down from on height.

The Bayon, built by **Jayavarman VII** shrouded in dense jungle, took a long time for researchers to realise that it stands in the exact centre of the City of Angkor Thom. There is still mystery associated with the Bayon. Until today, nobody knows its exact function and symbolism.

Some of the mysteriously looking smiling faces are partly covered with jungle.

The Bayon has really carved a memorable part in my mind.

I found it not a bad idea to visit the **Terrace of the Leper King** and the **Terrace of Elephants** used as a giant reviewing stand for public ceremonies. Use your imagination as you stand on top of the 350-meter long Terrace of Elephants. The grandeur of the Khmer empire with infantry, cavalry, horse-drawn chariots and elephants parading across the Central Square in a colourful procession.

Crowned with a golden diadem and shaded by multi-tiered parasols, attended by mandarins and handmaidens, the God-King was looking on it.

To end the last day of 2002, I decided to watch the sunset of Angkor Wat as a way of saying goodbye to 2002. Some 400m south of Angkor Thom, the sunset view has brought crowds of people gasping up the steep slope of the hill. It is also possible to get up the hill by an elephant ride.



As said earlier, I came here to celebrate New Year's Eve in an unusual setting and so it will be. In front of **Angkor What?** - one of the more popular ex-pat hangouts - people were already sitting on plastic chairs in the middle of the sandy road which has been blocked tonight from traffic. After some elbow work, we were able to sit down and get a 1-dollar draft beer from the barrel, placed on the road. A terrible sound system blew tape-recorded hits from the seventies in the air.

A few hundred foreigners, mixed with some locals were about to go wild when the sky shows a decoration of fireworks as we entered 2003. Soon it was clear that there were not enough barrels of beer but we didn't care and drank all kind of bottled beers what was left available. Happy New Year !!

Jan-1-'03

It takes a while to get from Siem Reap to **Kobal Spien**, more commonly referred to in English as The River of a Thousand Lingas. On arrival, it is yet another 30 minutes hiking through jungle -remember to stay on the track- before you reach the area of riverbed carvings and a refreshing waterfall. The first carvings include a large image of **Vishnu**. I have to admit that I did not expect more of this trip, specially considering that it takes away a significant part of your precious time to visit the place.

The temple of **Ta Phrom** is another popular attraction of Angkor which has been left to be swallowed by the jungle. Ta Phrom is a unique out-of-this-world experience with towers, close courtyards and narrow corridors. Bas-reliefs on bulging walls are carpeted by moss and creeping plants, and shrubs sprout from the roofs of monumental porches. Trees of over a hundred years old tower overhead, their leaves filtering the sunlight and casting a greenish pall over the whole scene.

This makes the whole area even more abstract and the first impression I got when I walked inside was like being in a living Indiana Jones movie.

Preah Khan (Sacred Sword) is a good counterpoint to Ta Phrom. It is a place of towered enclosures and corridors. The temple is surrounded by a rectangular wall of about 700m by 800m, but Preah Khan covers a very large area all together.

Our next stop was the 12th century Buddhist temple of **Phreah Neak Pean**. It consists of a square pool with four smaller square pools arranged on each axis.

Water once flowed from the central pool into the four peripheral pools via ornamental spouts, which still can be seen in the pavilions. The pool was used for ritual healings while the complex was originally in the centre of a huge 3km by 900m lake, now dried up and overgrown.

We had delicious lunch at a restaurant where the waitresses didn't have to throw away much trash. Not because of the guests were completely eating the huge portions, but because of small lumps-dressed children request politely to have the food you have left. Everything goes...from rice to banana leaves and even empty coke cans. They will first try to get that last drop out of it before they push the can bare-footed to a smaller size and collect them for some small Riels (local currency).

At the opposite of the road, we were within walking distance of **Bantaey Srei** (picture), another piece of art which should definitely exist on your itinerary. Bantaey Srei was for many years kept off from visitors by Khmer Rouge activity, but these days the site is possible to visit for no extra fee.



The temple is not particularly extensive but it is wonderfully preserved and its bas-relief are among the most beautiful of Angkor.

While I walked through this artistic jewel and kept myself busy with taking photographs, I was stopped by a well-built policeman who stood in front of me, looking me straight in the eyes and salutes me. His right heel stamping to his left at no further distance of half a meter between him and myself, I stood perplex.

Thinking about the Khmer Rouge activity which I had been reading previously, I was afraid like hell.

The accompanied park ranger, or whatever his function was, explained me that there's not a problem with me but my private guide was in trouble.

Because of the boy wasn't wearing the right shirt to act as a guide plus the fact that he didn't brought his tourist license, costs him a fine of some 175 US dollars, to be paid on the spot ! Of course the young man didn't had this amount of money - comparable with a monthly salary - in his pocket.

I was kindly requested to continue enjoying my visit while my private guide disappeared with the policeman.

About 20 minutes later, my guide returned with an emptied wallet. The poor guy had to turn his wallet inside-out on top of the office table and got to hand-over the content. Unfortunately, he carried 70 US dollar which he received earlier from other tourists. Not 175 US dollar because it was simply not available for the police but 75 US dollars has now disappeared in the pocket of the khaki-clad gentleman. Because we were visiting the site at a less crowded time, policemen sometimes take advantage by this way of earning money. We immediately left the complex which is under government control.

Today, I will get back to Saigon for another two nights but not without catching a glimpse of the famous Tonlé Sap (Great Lake), linked to the Mekong River at Phnom Penh by a 100km-long channel known as Tonlé Sap river. The lake which swells from 3000 sq km to over 7500 sq km and its depth increases from 2.2m to more than 10 meter during the rainy season between June to October.

When the water level of the Mekong falls during the dry season, the Tonlé Sap river reverses its flow, draining the waters of the lake back into the Mekong. This extraordinary process makes the Tonlé Sap lake one of the world's richest sources of freshwater fish. It is estimated that the lake provides a livelihood for about 40% of the Cambodian population.

The reason why I want to visit the lake however is because of the floating village.



Although the boat on the Tonlé Sap through the village disappointed me a little bit, probably because I've been comparing with other floating villages I've been visiting in the past, the area is perfect to take some great pictures. There are floating shops, a floating school and I even noticed a floating wooden church. The most spectacular floating establishment was undoubtedly a floating bar which includes a billiard ! Imagine that... people playing pool on a large floating raft. I have no idea how they managed to keep the balls away from rolling as the waves were quite

going up and down due the water traffic.

Once away from temples and Angkor monuments, you should include a country side trip. Just hop on a motorbike taxi or rent a bicycle and go outside. I met children playing in a river, farmers with oxcarts and fishermen throwing their nets in the lake. Just simple daily sights are great picture opportunities (see picture).

Because I had been drinking lots of water I needed to waste it urgently, I forgot about the landmines and placed my message somewhat away from the road in the fields, I noticed a signboard a bit further warning "Danger Landmines". Although I have been warned a couple of times before, I had forgotten to stay on the paths. Fortunately I still got both legs.

On the way back to the airport you will pass by the Siem Reap War museum which holds numerous types of weapons and landmines, used during the Pol Pot regime. A guide will lead you around the outside museum while giving detailed explanation. Although the guide has lost one leg by stepping on a landmine, he was still more lucky than his parents who were shot dead in the massacre of the seventies.

The museum is'nt as interesting as the war museum in Saigon. Perhaps Phnom Penh is a better place to visit if you're interested in war history.

It was about noon when the propeller flight back to Saigon landed at Tan Son Nhat airport. It seemed to be a convenient and quick walk-through the airport terminal until I ended up at the Vietnamese border control...

"You have no visa to enter Vietnam sir." said the custom agent. I replied "I paid for a multiple-entry visa at your embassy in Brussels!" -- "Sorry sir, please proceed to the custom-office" -- As I moved to a small desk in the corner of the terminal, there was another problem-kid in front of me shouting to the custom-agent anything which is not really nice to write down here. Although he was allowed from Malaysian authorities to enter Vietnam, he had no right to enter Vietnam because he had no visa.

The passenger, a young guy with a German accent in his English, who kept complaining was seriously working on the agent's nerves. The last thing you should ever do when your passport is not ok in a communist country as Vietnam, is making the authorities upset. It is the best way NOT being able to enter the country. After a long noisy discussion, the German passenger was told that he had no visa and therefore should return to Kuala Lumpur! The guy kept shouting until some moments later, two Malaysian Airlines' officials appeared on the scene. The poor guy had no other choice than follow the officials back to the plane to Kuala Lumpur.

"Next" yelled the custom-agent. I saw the thunder already in the sky and kindly gave my passport to the official who's face was about to explode. "You no visa!...you go back to Cambodia" he screamed. I remained calm and tried to explain the guy that during my departure out of Vietnam, an unattended custom agent has accidentally stamped 'USED' on my visa. This was indeed what actually happened. Of course, the fault was with the Vietnamese customs - not with me! However, the guy who completely lost control because of the previous affair, would'nt understand it that way and kept repeating to me that I have no other option than returning to Cambodia.

My visa, given by the Vietnamese Embassy in Brussels was originally a multi-entry type, so I was allowed to re-enter the country. If not enough, I had paid for an official document given by Vietnamese authorities (!), which outlined that I was offered to enter Vietnam multiple times. This document actually is'nt needed to get a visa, but it simplifies the procedure to get one.

After three hours of sightseeing in the custom's terminal, my name was finally announced to return to the custom's official office. Huong had faxed this document to the agent

who then simply added some typex to cover 'USED' away from my visa and I was able to proceed through the border control. Welcome back to Vietnam !!!



That night I enjoyed a delicious dinner at **Blue Ginger** (picture) with the great company of Huong's fantastic relatives and herself of course. Many thanks for a memorable night.

Jan-3-'03



My last full day again on Vietnamese grounds was spent with some activity which until now I still don't understand how I dare to manage it. Saigon has over 4 million motorbike moving around from one place to another. Today I was one of them. Try to imagine a traffic where everything is possible, red traffic light illuminated or not - just go for it ! Travelling by motorbike in Saigon can be good fun, but it can also be a near-death experience (or worse). However, myself I can claim a *I survived Saigon T-*

shirt, it's not recommended.

It is in any way a fantastic experience to be right in the middle between literally hundreds of fellow-bikers and moving further between other noisy Chinese two-wheelers.

Jan-4-'03

My flight from Saigon today, will connects me in Bangkok immediately to my next destination: **Phuket**. Although, I have been numerous times to this tropical gem in Southern Thailand, I simply can't go home without making a stop here.

The island has everything to offer for a perfect holiday. No matter what you like, it's here and available. Game fishing, Sea canoeing, Rock climbing (Krabi), Island hopping, outstanding nightlife, delicious food ... I can go on for a while. Ad the sunshine who is never to far away, tropical temperatures and gorgeous Asian chicks, and you might understand the reason why you'll find me here at least once a year and definitely during our cold winter.

So, this time was no different as I planned to stay here until Jan 10 before I would continue to Bangkok.

It was already getting dark when I left the airport terminal. I had booked the **Patong Villa** by internet from my convenient chair back home and as all the other parts of this trip, also here in Phuket, someone was waiting to give me a ride to the hotel.

Perhaps because it was already a year ago since I went here previously, I felt very happy to be back here and the drive in the darkness, passing by the rubber trees, made me dreaming about past and present.

I was folding page by page from my many earlier Phuket-visits while I was staring outside. The 45-minute ride to **Patong Beach** could'nt be fast enough for me. I was excited to see Patong Beach again.

At the Patong Villa hotel, I was offered a splendid bungalow located on ground level around the small inner court. It is the perfect setting ! The hotel is located right in the heart of lively Patong Beach, just steps away from famous **Bangla Road** but nicely hidden from the rumour and crowds.

Before, I stayed in a number of different resorts big and small throughout Patong Beach. Now, I found the perfect spot. The always friendly hotel staff, have been doing there best to please this guest.

I am not going into detail but Patong has some of the greatest nightlife to offer on our planet. Always big fun and pleasure.

After the first few days, I was already considering to change my on-going bookings to Bangkok and stay here until the last day instead of just six nights. Life is simply perfect here, and I didn't want to go back to Bangkok. Not that I hate Bangkok, which has its own charms to my opinion, but I was having a good time here. The final three nights in Bangkok, I had already booked as well my domestic Thai Airways flight.



I have never experienced any inconveniences with Thai Airways to change my flight, neither domestic, international or even intercontinental. They always willing to help. As days went on, I changed my flight back to Bangkok 2 days later, giving me the possibility to celebrate my birthday in Phuket and more important, spend two more nights in this paradise.

On Jan 10, the hotel staff has'nt forgotten me when a fruit & flower basket decorated my room, with happy birthday wishes (picture). I wish to thank the Patong Villa hotel staff, for a memorable stay between Jan 4 and 12, 2003
