



From Thailand to Cambodia

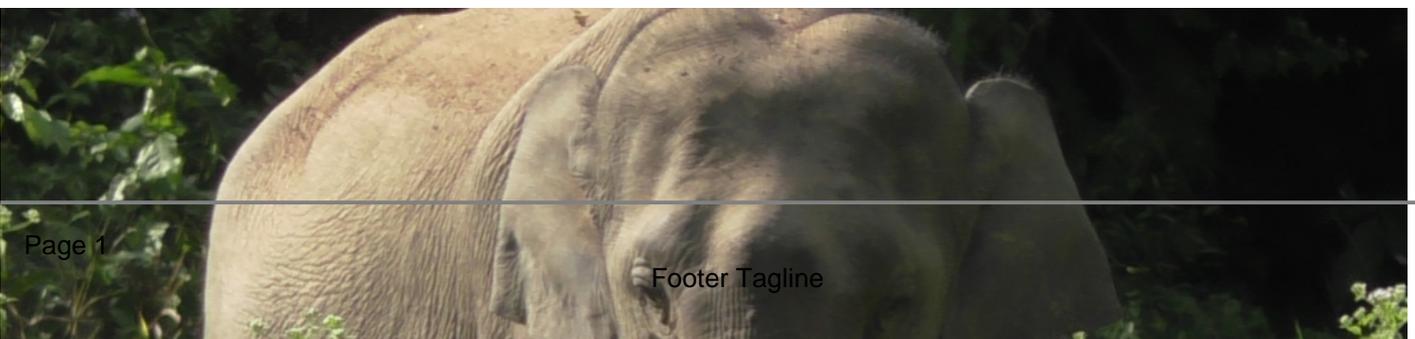
Description

A friend asked me a couple of days ago if what she sees on Facebook actually reflects my status. I mean, really joy and fun ..? that's how she put it. It took me a moment to understand and respond. I'm not always happy and having a great time, but I'm happy. A big word but " Yes, I'm happy.

I asked The One if he was happy and he said "I think so". I'm fine with that. As I last recall, this is what he replied when I asked him if he wanted to get married. "I think so". So I think that in the middle of our 19th year together, I ready to accept that "I think so" is a great answer for me. I think, therefore I am, I'm the most stunning man in the world and I'm with you. Why bother with subtleties. (Note to self " publish this post before he sees what I wrote.)

So where are we now? Well. We are in Phnom Penh, Cambodia. I'm about to confess of something not yet happened to us in the history of our journey and blog (a mistake in the plan. Yes Yes. Us. We did it. A mistake. In plan. Us! About as planned and careful as plan and careful can be. The full confession soon). But first of what we endured so far.

My last post was in Prachuap Khiri Khan. We came to a night or two, extended to 5 nights and ended up staying 6 nights because last night we all sat in the yard and chit-chatted, and Julia, a German backpacker of Laotian origin, said she heard about a place not far with a national reserve where we can see elephants in the wild. So far we avoided the "elephants attractions" since we are against commercialization of these animals, and their training including, most likely, drugging and violence. But natural reserve where elephants just live in, sounds spectacular. So we arranged with Julia that we go there together and indeed we went the next day. It was an exhausting and amazing day as Safari day should be. We saw a herd of dozens of elephants, including baby-elephants and children-elephants and trumpeting sounds. Mommy elephant gets pissed off with her kids and give nice trumpeting roars apparently. Mainly in the afternoon, when it's time to get to the river showers and stop dragging behind the rest of the group.



Wild Asian elephants in Kui Buri



The next day we carried on with our journey to the north, a five-hour train and another bus for two hours or so to Kanchanaburi. We arrived at a very nice guesthouse and the first thing we found in it were Israelis. Sixty plus guys, including one pair from my home Kibbutz (a classmate of my father and his wife), and their friend from another village in the Golan Heights. There was a great connection with them. The next day we set to travel together to a nearby waterfall. They recommended the ride, which was much longer than a bus ride but included an amazing view which was worth it. The waterfall itself was not really worth it, but we do not complain. We caught a bus back and after a few minutes we realized we forgot the video camera and started a little adventure.

We went down, The One and I, from the bus. We left the kids in the safe hands of the guys and started our chase. We rushed back to the bus stop, after nearly a mile of rushing and gasping, we suddenly saw in the opposite direction a guy getting down from a scooter and running to us with a camera in hand, shouting to us in Thai. We were shocked, how on earth did he know that the camera is ours and where to find us?! He also knew that we needed to get to Kanchanaburi and pointed us to the station where we have to wait. We waited there for almost an hour for the next bus, which seemed like an eternity because we had no idea when the next bus is due to arrive and yet our children were not with us .. It was stressful, I troubled more or less the entire district with questions about when the next bus is coming up. No one spoke English so I developed a method to try and understand the answers I got. We could already make a table with the variety of responses we received. About half of the respondents insisted that the bus comes in 18: 00 while the other half maintained 18:30 and it actually ended up with the bus arriving at ten minutes to six. Punctual.

In short, after crossing information with our friends, when we returned to the guesthouse (they meanwhile made sure the staff will open the childrenâ€™s room and sent them to shower!), it became

clear to us that the local information network was very efficient. The bus driver that picked us got a phone call asking about us. Probably someone at the station where we got on the bus realized that we left without the camera and there was a joint effort to locate us and return the loss. What a shame that all this scene was not filmed LOL.



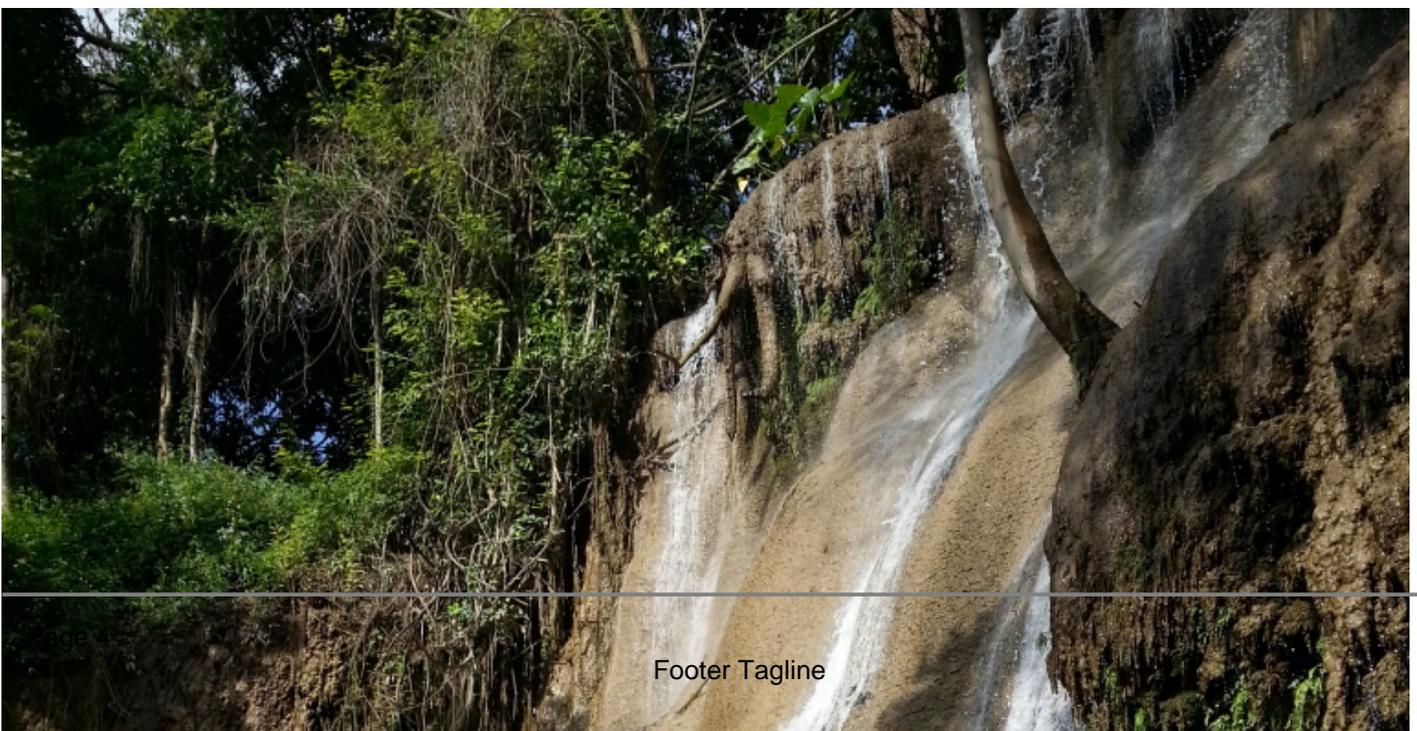
Struggling with sticky rice in bamboo stick on the train to Kanchanaburi



That famous bridge



VN guesthouse in Kanchanaburi



Sai Yok waterfalls, a day trip from Kanchanaburi

From Kanchanaburi we took a minibus to Bangkok to continue towards the border with Cambodia. On the first night in Bangkok we had a very nasty guesthouse, combined with the fact that I was crazy with nausea and an upset stomach, it was really really no fun. I fought with The One and exchanged text messages all night long with friends of mine longing for someone to hold my hand while I was the most miserable in the universe. The next day we moved to a nicer guest house and everything looked better. My stomach got better and I got encouraged by remembering that being sick makes you thin. I also fixed my eyebrows in Khao San street and that got me totally recovered.

We have been warned about the land border crossing to Cambodia so we decided to do everything we can to get through it as easy as possible. As part of the preparations we did e-visas online and we split the travel for two days instead of doing everything from Bangkok to Siem Reap in one day and it turned out to be a good idea. We found a motel in Aran, a town on Thailand border. We arrived by train that took six hours. It was definitely enough for one day and it was good thing that we didn't have to continue to cross the border in the same day, especially as the motel turned out to be really great and even had a pool!

The next day we got up fresh. We crossed the border relatively smoothly, except for one little scam, we arrived safely in Siem Reap.

So what is our opinion so far on Cambodia? Frankly, ambivalent. The weather is great, relatively dry and pleasant. In the evening I even wear jeans and I feel I screwed the system by finally letting it out of the mochila. Cambodians speak English much better Thais and it makes things more convenient. What is less pleasant here is that we should be paying attention all the time not to be cheated by someone you and we always have that feeling that people just try to squeeze the money out of our wallet. In places like Angkor Wat, tourist frenzy destination, or in the city itself, you can't move without eight tuktuk drivers hopping all over you offering an overpriced shuttle and seventeen children dressed in rags with babies with dripping noses in their hands begging for charity, and of course all the crippled legless / handless / blind / both beggars adding a the final touch of general human misery.

The trip from Siem Reap to Phnom Penh is on a bus that makes 300 km in 8 hours, while more than half of the way was not even a road but rather a dirt trail. It is a jumpy as it sounds. Just imagine. Now add to what you imagined the Cambodian driving culture that includes terrible horns every few seconds to few minutes, plus a soundtrack of Cambodian karaoke songs on the bus television, loudly. Luxury! Through the bus windows we see miles and miles of rice paddies and cows and sunset and people living in horrible poverty and pick-up trucks departing at four thirty in the afternoon packed with human sardines from the local sweatshops.

But I promised embarrassing confession. So there it goes. We are in Phnom Penh in fact mainly, if not only, in order to organize our Vietnam visas. Therefore, it was not that good planning to come here on Saturday night (last night), because it's Sunday and embassies are closed. Nor did we examine whether embassies are closed on weekdays due to the Christmas holiday. Tomorrow we'll find out. It would have been better if we took a night bus, arrive here tomorrow morning instead of last night and check in advance if Christmas doesn't mess up our plans. I hope we get to the embassy tomorrow to find it is open and then we can have our visas. Then we'll decide where to go from here and when. Fingers crossed.

Kui Buri National Park

One of the few parks where you can see free wild Asian elephants in their natural habitat (as opposed to the trained elephants used for labor, riding or circus in rest of East Asia). There is more wildlife in the park (buffalo, monkeys, tapirs and even tigers), but the main attraction and the mammal with best chances to see are the elephants.

We arrived at the park with a private driver we hired in Prachuap and we also hired a guide in the park (3000 baht). Add to it the standard entrance fee to the park (200 baht for adults and 100 children). You can theoretically reach there independently, but it is only theoretically. It is about two hours away by car from Prachuap. The best time when elephants are most active is in the afternoon from 15:00 until the evening.

Kanchanaburi

A province city west of Bangkok, which became famous mainly due to the bridge over the River Kwai (the one from the book and the film). In Kanchanaburi we stayed in a lodge called VN Guesthouse that sits right on the river bank. Like all Kanchanaburi it is very cheap and not bad at all in terms of location and cleanliness. Across the bridge over the River Kwai (which is actually not really the bridge and the river is actually not really the river) we visited the Sai Yok waterfall after an about 3 hours ride by train. Kanchanaburi also has a nice night market, although we find that the market in Prachuap is better in terms of quality and variety.

We arrived in Kanchanaburi after a 5 hours train ride from Prachuap (45 baht for adults) with a stop at Ban Pong and from there an about one hour and a half direct bus to Kanchanaburi (70 baht per adult). To the guesthouse we just took a tuk tuk (50 baht).

Thailand-Cambodia border

Internet is full of all sorts of warnings on this notorious border crossing notorious alerting on the amount of crooks around the place on both sides of the border. On the Thailand side lies the city Aranyaprathet or Aran in short. This is a rather miserable city which all existence is based the tourism and commerce around it being an easy transition point to Cambodia. In Aran we stayed in a pretty good motel called Market Motel named so for its proximity to the local market. The hotel is comfortable, spacious, has a decent restaurant (which you can hardly tell about the rest of the city) and the highlight " a wonderful swimming pool. The hotel is used mainly by traders traveling between Thailand and Cambodia. We hired double rooms at 300 baht per night.

We reached Aran with the Eastern line leaving from Bangkok Hua-Lamphong main railway station. It's simply the very last stop of the train. A 6-hours ride (40 baht per adult). In Aran we took a tuk tuk to the hotel (20 baht).

In the Thailand side of the border we crossed quite easily. You are required to fill out a form and of course make sure that the visa is valid upon exit. After moving on a bit there is a kind of twilight zone before reaching the Cambodian border where there is a chaotic mix of vendors, carts with goods, casinos and many kinds of wheeler-dealers who try to sell you anything from visas to bus tickets to Cambodia. Just ignore them and carry on. We did not talk to anyone except gray clothes officials (who are not necessarily saints). We crossed the Cambodia side of the border quite easily as well thanks to the eVisa we purchased in advance. One can also make visa on arrival instead but rumors said this process may take hours and increases the possibility of falling into the hands of crooks.

After passing the passport control there is a free shuttle that takes all foreigners to the central station in Poipet, the city in the Cambodian side of the border.

It is better to come equipped in advance in US dollars although they will also respect Thai baht (though with outrageous conversion rates). There is no need to exchange domestic currency (Riel). American

dollars are unofficially the actual the currency in Cambodia. From Poipet there are buses, minibuses or taxis to almost anywhere in Cambodia. Take into account the bus service starts only at noon. Minibuses start in the morning.

Siem Reap

A town in northwestern Cambodia that got its reputation due to the magnificent temples of Angkor that are located nearby. The city is very well developed for tourism and flooded in hotels, bars, restaurants and tourist services to mini attractions around. We chose a to stay in a guesthouse named Adan World that was reasonable, cheap and even included a pretty good breakfast.

Siem Reap is about 4 hours of minibus drive and \$ 10 per passenger away from Poipet through a well-paved road in Cambodians standards.

Angkor park itself is about 6 km from the city center. We rented a tuk tuk at \$ 15 that accompanied us from the amazing sunrise over the temples to the end of the day trip. You can also hire an English speaking guide. We tried to rent one but he just did not show up in the morning of the trip, so we gave up the privilege. The park entrance fee is \$ 20 per person for a single day entrance. Children under 12 are free of charge. You can also buy a ticket for 3 days. For us, and especially for the children, one day was enough. The park itself is busy with stalls of merchants and restaurants. Rates are evidently much higher than in the city but everything is bargainable.

From Siem Reap to Phnom Penh we got on the bus that took us 8 hours ride at a price of \$ 7 per passenger.



Angkor Wat, near Siem Reap







Category

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