



Greg and Merrie's excellent adventure

Some people around Braidwood received email missives from Merrie Hamilton and Greg Sugden as they wheeled their way across Asia.

Here are some highlights for the rest of us ...

AFTER FLYING OUT OF SYDNEY, we had a two-hour stopover in Kuala Lumpur. The airport was a bit spooky. Airport security were all Muslim women dressed in black like ninjas and made it very clear with just their heavily made-up eyes and their abrupt shouted orders that they did not like westerners. Maybe they were having a bad day.

KAMALA

We arrived at Phuket airport at 9 pm and after a 30-minute taxi ride moved into a large apartment at Kamala beach well away from the crowds at Patong. We were a novelty and the locals were very friendly towards us. We ventured down to Patong on the bike a couple of times but quickly retreated from the hordes of tourists back to Kamala.

We have not cooked a meal since we left. The variety and the deliciousness of the food is a highlight. So is the price — usually from \$6 to \$8 for the two of us including drinks (cold beer). We hired a motorbike our first day in Kamala and have continued to have one ever since. Traffic is hairy but I ride defensively. Road rules like driving on one side of the road are not necessarily adhered to and stop signs and traffic lights are more like sugges-

tions than obligations. It is always hot and humid but cool on the bike.

Each day in Kamala, we rose early to avoid the heat, swam in the pool and then explored the beaches and countryside on the bike. It was lush and green and hilly. Most afternoons it rained heavily for an hour or so and we'd hang in at the resort and watch a movie or two and then go out for dinner.

On our last night we splurged and went to Fantasea — a singing dancing floor show extravaganza with mime, trapeze, fireworks, traditional costume, 20 elephants, dozens of trained chooks, monkeys, goats, a laser light show; often all up on stage at once in a packed indoor theatre that holds thousands.

We kept to ourselves and did little socialising in Kamala. After a week, we flew north.

CHIANG RAI

We had booked a few nights in Chiang Mai but it was always our intention to move to the smaller city of Chiang Rai.

Our lodgings were in the old quarter of CM and we tuk-tuked to old buildings, palaces, temples and shrines.

The numerous food markets and night markets buzz with people and music and dancing and food and an amazing

array of merchandise I've never seen before.

Chiang Mai was too big and busy and after three days we bused it to Chiang Rai, two hours away.

CR was just right for us. There were lots of whities in CM but there were virtually none in Chiang Rai. Again we stood out and were stared at but we quickly came to realise they were keen to befriend us.

We spent two weeks there and engaged with three families who each spoke a little English. We ate in their homes or restaurants, and we saw them regularly.

I spent time at a government high school in Chiang Rai. It was huge, 3000 students, and I witnessed Wai Kru day — teacher appreciation day — when students pay respect to their teachers for the gift of learning and thank them for the knowledge they receive.

In an elaborate ceremony, each class presented their teacher with a beautiful sculpture made of flowers they had spent three hours making the day before.

The ceremony began with the students kneeling and bowing with their heads on the ground as their teachers walked single file into the huge assembly hall. The teachers then sat up on stage in front of an array of the flower sculptures while the students recited a Buddhist chant and sang three songs of thanks and humility. There were tears in the eyes of both the teachers and students.

We explored extensively on the bike the country around CR as well as joining cafe society in the city itself. When you are the only westerner around, everyone wants to engage with you. All you have to do is break the ice with an hello.

CHIANG MAI

Back in CM for our last week in Thailand we stayed at the Lanna Mantra resort. It had been recommended to us by a Thai friend in Australia who grew up there. It was a fabulous retreat from the city only 10 minutes away — decorated and landscaped Lanna style to echo Thai culture. It had an atmosphere of peace and tranquility and a pool that we used morning and night. Our room was on the second floor with a balcony overlooking the pool and the river.

HANOI

We flew into Hanoi at about three in the afternoon and after getting yet another Sim card for our phone and withdrawing five million dong (about

WHY MOPE AT HOME WHEN YOU CAN MOPED ABROAD?

\$250) from an ATM, the difference between Vietnam and Thailand became immediately obvious.

The Thais are marked by their politeness and I don't remember hearing a car horn in the whole month we were there. In the taxi ride from Hanoi airport to our hotel in the old quarter, our driver must have used the horn hundreds of times, as did everyone else on the road.

Here if you are about to draw up alongside someone or overtake them or someone is joining the traffic, everyone honks their horn. In the city the result is a constant cacophony of toots and beeps. Since renting a bike here I do it myself constantly.

In Thailand we did not experience culture shock but wow, Hanoi was another matter. It was total culture shock.

Outside our hotel it was swarming with people, motorbikes with five people on them including babies, street vendors selling things you could not imagine; everywhere stepping around families cooking and eating on the footpaths. People sitting, sleeping, socializing in the middle of the road, bicycles totally overloaded with flowers or you name it and western tourists trying to find a way through aggressive hawkers. Toddlers running everywhere, the car and bike horns and the obvious poverty.

On our first night we went to dinner at a Viet restaurant in the old quarter. The food was delicious. It was 9 pm on a Monday night and outside it was swarming. I was sitting facing the street and looking out, honesty I thought I was living on the set on Blade Runner. I liked it immediately.

One feature of our stay in Hanoi was that we were often accosted by students from Hanoi university wanting to speak English with us. There is a lake near the old quarter where we would go in the early evening. It is a favourite place for thousands of people to promenade.

A crowd draws a crowd and one student quickly became six. Sometimes Merrie would have six and I would have another six all wanting to improve their English. Once we attracted the attention of the police who came up blowing whistles. I thought they suspected us of subverting the youth with western ideas but the students told us the police thought we were being harassed. We assured the police we enjoyed the students so they stayed with us.

After a week we left Hanoi for Tam Coc 100 km to the south.

KHANH HOA

We knew nothing about the place. We put a pin on a map and picked the next big city in Vietnam south of Tam Coc that was near the beach.

We saw only one other white person during the whole week we stayed there. We were like celebrities. Locals wanted to be photographed with us in shopping malls and restaurants. Generally, they were shy but very friendly. Many had never had any contact with a westerner before.

In Thanh Hoa whenever we walked into a restaurant all hell broke loose with everybody staring, the staff falling over each other to accommodate us. Always wanting us to sit near the front so they could show us off to passers by.

LUANG PREBANG

We flew from Hanoi to Luang Prebang in Laos, not in a big jet, but in a little plane with propellers that held about 50 people.

We manage to eat cheaply at sit down street vendors where you watch them cook the food or in restaurants full of locals. We've now eaten out for 63 nights in a row. We usually pay about \$6 to \$8 including drinks.

The sights you see commonly on

motorbikes — mothers riding one handed while nursing a baby, or mother riding one handed with baby and toddler standing on the scooter in front of her and another sitting and holding on from behind. Families of 5 on the one bike with no helmets; 3 teenage girls on the one bike all texting on their phones, people carrying loads 10 times bigger than their bike, a guy riding his bike with his foot on his mate's bicycle or motorbike alongside that is maybe out of petrol to push him along, young cowboys with no helmet speeding thru traffic dangerously as if they're in a video game, people riding slowly 3 or 4 abreast chatting away while ignoring the frustration of the people behind them and always, constantly riders on the wrong side of the road riding straight at you often texting at the same time.

One thing I am enjoying is the butterflies. They are big and beautiful — black, aqua, yellow, red plain or spotted and fluttering everywhere we go.

While we are enjoying it all, we are also missing home. But we know it's freezing back there and now that we're here, we should see and experience has much as we can before rushing back home to what we know.

