

BAYON



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Photo: Jim California 2

Notes from Ratanakiri

'People from all over the world have passed through this village, son' said his father. 'They come in search of new things, but when they leave they are basically the same people they were when they arrived. They climb the mountain to see the castle, and they wind up thinking that the past was better than what we have now. They have blond hair, or dark skin, but basically they're the same as the people who live right here.'

The Alchemist, Paul Coelho

I met Laurent Jeanneau in Ratanakiri. A lean, tough, Frenchman; harsh hair, but with a resolutely Gallic flamboyancy. He has spent the last twenty years traveling with the ethnic minorities of Africa and Asia. The Mhong tribe in Laos, the Hadza in Tanzania, the Pygmies in Zaire, gypsies in Rajasthan and now, the various ethnic groups of Cambodia. Each tells its own story of oppression and pummeling at the hands of more powerful ethnic majorities. These relatively tiny populations seem fated to find themselves caught up in the intrigues of major powers, pawns in a play of power alien to them.

Yet Laurent's interest lies below, or perhaps above, international politics. He records tribal music. Lacking the desired credentials in music or academia, his earlier efforts received little recognition. Then in 1999 he met the Hadza of Tanzania, who had already foiled numerous anthropologists in their efforts to record the tribal music. Laurent's relaxed approach, motivated by an earnest desire simply to live with the people, paid dividends. A double CD was released on the Musique du Monde Label.

We met at the Yak Lom Lake, situated a short ride outside of Ban Lung, the provincial capital of Ratanakiri. A picturesque volcanic lake, formed 700'000 years ago by the footprint of a giant. Laurent was planning to leave the next day for a Jarai village just shy of the Vietnamese border, where he had heard whispers of a lavish gong ceremony. Despite his



inherent fear and loathing of the backpacker I was invited to come, ostensibly as a friend of Guy, my host in Phnom Penh and his friend from Paris.

'How are we getting to the village?'

'We're cycling.'

'We're cycling? Through the jungle?'

'Yes.'

So we cycled. A pick-up from Ban Lung took us the 40km or so to the remote town of Bokeo, from where we made our own way. 30km more brought us to the jungle, where the Khmer villages emphatically ceased

to be. The path is beaten out my generations of use by the multitude of different tribes that occupy the area, but the going was hard. Where we couldn't cycle we pushed our bikes and where we couldn't push our bikes we carried them. At various points along the way we passed shallow mountain streams, and the cool, soothing water proved a Godsend for aching muscles and chaffed skin. Deep into Jarai territory, where a stream cascades down a jutting rock, a local village has set three bamboo shoots into the stream, creating the most beautiful shower. My rucksack, which I had thought Spartan when we left, became heavier and heavier and the non-essentials were soon jettisoned. The Life of Pi was left behind at a stream where a local girl was washing. Not unaccustomed to mysterious white men handing out strange books, she asked me if it was a holy book. I told her I suppose it is, in a way.

On our way we witnessed some of the challenges posed to the ethnic minorities, both past and furiously present. The jungle is littered with the detritus of the US bombing campaign conducted between 1970 and 1973. We met two tribesmen carrying an enormous bombshell on their shoulders. Even in its rusty state it was ominous to imagine the kind of destruction it might have caused and how alone it was only a drop in the ocean. It was common to see a collection of bombshells, masses of horribly twisted metal, at the center of a village. But the bombs looked so out of place in these sleepy villages with their friendly communities, as did the still-visible bomb craters. It seemed that only some awful mistake could have brought the full wrath of a western superpower onto these people. In this collision between the politics of the superpowers and the fate of a people struggling only for their own land lies, perhaps, the cruelest irony of the modern world. Yet in an eloquent metaphor for the survival of these people in the face of such battering, the bombshells are recycled. Tools, jewellery, scrap-metal, thank-you very much. The aftermath of war brought its own kind of destruction. Cycling through the jungle the trees, foliage – everything – would suddenly break out into great open spaces. Swathes of pristine hardwood, masses of jungle, the ecosystem at its most raw, all brought to its knees by chainsaws and fire. The peak of the dry season is the season for burning, and charred stumps still smoked away in the barren wasteland.

I remember the first night as a dream. Broken fragments of sensory experience. The images move gracefully in a circular motion, full of colour. The sounds are of gongs, but gongs that tinkle like piano in a wild fever. There is laughter, but it is undershot with groaning lamentation. The smell is the pungent burning of shaggy tobacco and banana leaves. And the taste, sweet, but vinegary. And yeasty as well. And sour, but fruity. Yeah, it's very definitely the taste of rice wine.

My memory serves me - in the solid, reliable manner that we like to expect of the faculty - for a few hours of that night. We arrived as the light was failing. The settlement was about the size of a football pitch. A large communal area squared in by long, narrow bamboo-thatch huts, propped up a few feet off the dusty earth. The huts are structured into numerous compartments and are cohabited by several families, emphasizing the bond of identity. At the center, where the hut opens out, is a communal area where the Jarai cook, drink and shoot the wind. This is where we were to sleep and it felt like being welcomed into the bosom of the family, in both a symbolic and a very real sense. The village is watched over on all sides by the unsleeping eyes of the jungle. My preconception of the jungle was as a scary, eery place. But here its omnipresence was reassuring, its spirit tangible. And the strange thing about the jungle - one of many strange things, I suppose - is the noise. The jungle is not just loud, but raucous. The repetitive scratching sound of millions of insects, punctuated by the calls of strange birds. Every new angle throws at you a different wall of sound. The scratching builds up into a rhythmic frenzy, only to peak and die and be replaced by a different rhythm. And all the time, no matter how hard you look, the sound comes from nowhere. You don't see the insects or the birds, or the small creature of some description that was rustling in that bush.

The Jarai cemetery was situated in a small clearing in the jungle, close to the village. The parallel between the noise of jungle and the strange, equally organic, sounds emanating from this place evoked the idea that the Jarai are as much of the jungle as the insects and animals. Their animist religion upholds the worship of animals and spirits. In the comfort of the west, as these strange ideas appear from a book, they are primitive ideas. Yet here they make so much sense. I had always held the expression 'primitive' to have derogatory connotations. Primitive people are basic, primitive people are uncivilized. And to a certain extent this is true. But to see the Jarai and to witness their culture, what became so abundantly clear was the sense of primacy. And in this primacy, in being primal, they became glorious.

The tomb was a wooden, rectangular structure. At each corner stood a tall, handcrafted totem pole, into which were carved crude figures of women and men. To make the scene so much more surreal, at the top of each pole stood very accurate, painstakingly carved models of US helicopters. The irony spoke out loud: here it was, a Jarai tomb, thousands of miles from America, adorned with US military helicopters. The area was walled in, and inside it, along with half-buried possessions of the dead man, sat his immediate family. They were roofed by a tall, two-tiered construction into which, at various stages of the ceremony, exhausted family members would climb and sleep. Every inch was decorated with paintings and crude scrawling. This new tomb dominated the cemetery. There were other tombs, smaller. In time they had all deteriorated into a state of disrepair. This was a strange sight, being used to the way in which we mark our burial sites with stone, for posterity. Tied to each totem pole by reassuringly sturdy rope were four enormous water buffalos and a number of small pigs. The nonplussed expressions on their faces belied the open secret of their fate. Pigs, at various stages of the first night, were clubbed repetitively over the head until sticky blood poured out of their mouths and they lay prostrate. Their still-moving bodies were put into fires to char the hair, which was scraped off with surprisingly effective bamboo knives. Every inch of the dismembered body was consumed, save the guts. At first we ate what I would recognize as meat, packed into hollowed bamboos with smashed rice and cooked on



the fire. Later, we ate everything else, sometimes barely touched by fire. We gorged. Around the tomb were sat one, maybe two hundred Jarai of all ages. From the youngest baby to the oldest old woman. The women do not traditionally wear tops, but the younger of them flout the trend. The oldest women sat proudly displaying their breasts in all their saggy glory. And all of them, to a man, were smoking. The children, perhaps as young as four, devoured cheap cigarettes like sweets. In fact, the sweets that I brought for them were begrudgingly accepted, but when I brought out a packet of cigarettes I was mugged. It looked so funny at first to see them puffing away on cigarettes nearly as big as them. Trying to sleep through a cacophony of the most painful child smokers-coughs was another thing.

On the fringes of the gathering were innumerable tall, broad jars, to which I was to have a very thorough introduction. Rice is packed into the jars and left to ferment for a few days. They are lined up and filled with water and the potent juices are sucked up from the bottom through thin, hollow bamboo straws. The water is repeatedly topped up until the last remnants of alcohol have been washed from the rice. But the trauma is not yet over - the Jarai are possessed of more jars. And more jars. Old men and old women sat sucking contentedly on the straws for hours on end, buoyed by the endless supply of meat. The thing about the jars is that they all taste different. As guests of the boundless Jarai hospitality, we were obliged to try each jar in turn. Ten faces would watch as I drew hard on the straw, swished the concoction around my mouth in a sophisticated manner and declare my learned verdict on the bouquet in fluent Jarai. Sort of. Then the occupant of the next perch along would beckon me on to try his. And all night we were dragged back and forth from the row of jars. Drinking next to a relatively young man who had had far too much rice wine for his own good, he started sniffing me. Fair go, I thought, a day cycling and you'd smell. But the sniffing was fast, like that of an amorous dog. Laurent told me later that, common to other tribes and Khmer people, sniffing is how they kiss. I don't think I helped the case by giggling like a schoolgirl (in my defence, it really did tickle very much).

The tribal gongs are forged out of copper or brass, many very old. The set is composed of thirteen gongs; five, large with rounded bobbles at their center and eight, small and flat. They are hung from the shoulders of thirteen men and boys, who march slowly round the tomb in rhythm. One guy begins playing a rhythm on his gong and others begin one after another, adding to the tune with their gongs when they see fit. Sometimes the result is a mess, but they achieve moments of perfect coordination, when the disparate sounds join in a tinkling, boing-ing frenzy, like a drunk ragtime piano player. The music went on for three days straight, still going when I collapsed to sleep and still going when I awoke. When one player fell out, he was replaced by another. The sounds could be heard from the village and into the jungle, a mellow, melancholic soundtrack. Closer to the tomb, the music

was paired with an undercurrent of low, sonorous moaning. The family singing lamentations.

When I crashed out from the jars, a drunk Jarai dragged me to the tomb. He strapped a thick, wooden mask of a devil over my face, hung a cloak over my head and a drum on my shoulder. My knowledge of Jarai ceremony failed me, but I assumed I was some form of mythological devil. So I took up the role. My job, as such, was to march in front of the gong players and sound them a rhythm. My main responsibility, however, was to scare the children. This was not so difficult, as they already had an innate terror of the two strange, wide-eyed white men. I had made small children cry just by looking at them already (of course, they were allowed to stare at me as much as they liked, and they did, and I didn't cry). So I swayed my hips like Elvis, twisted my head this way and that and danced to my own beat. The contrast between the melancholic family inside the tomb and the insalubrious party around them could not have been more pronounced. It was like the funeral and the wake at the same time, in concentric circles.

The next morning the buffalos were sacrificed. A Jarai with a long, heavy sword danced around them and cut into each leg in turn with brutal grace. The buffalo writhed and struggled every way but could not release themselves from the clutches of the tomb. When they collapsed, a blow was dealt to the back of the neck. The legion of skinny dogs went wild at the sight and smell of the blood, which ran in gullies, thickening in the dust. An axe was used to sever the head. The long, elegant horns were ripped out and hung on the totem poles, the savaged heads, fixed with expressions of animal horror, tied to trees in the village. Fires were built over the bodies, the beasts charred where they lay. Before the laborious task of the butchery was begun in earnest, thick strips of raw meat were cut from the back and devoured in a mass of chewing and blood. The four buffalo, in various manifestations of rawness and anatomy, were consumed through the day.

We left at dawn, the third day after our arrival in the village. The recording completed, the burden on the digestional tract becoming overwhelming. And so the experience ended. As we left that world behind it became more surreal, more other-worldly. The party continued for a fourth consecutive day, more jars called for and the buffalo heads unceremoniously removed from where they hung and cooked. Yet just as easily as we had been cast into this world we were removed from it, the thought of the revelry continuing only a fiction. Ban Lung, which had so recently seemed to me to be the end of the Earth, materialized out of its dusty haze as a bastion of civilization. The terre-rouge, kicked up by a day of activity, hung over the town as a fog in the failing light of dusk. Civilization.

Karts, Crashes and Crowds

In April the Formula 1 boys and the Grand Prix road show rolled into town. The new circuit was a triumph and raised the standards for all the others. Michael Schumacher, predictably, took first place. That, though was Bahrain. Not to be outdone, on the 10th April Phnom Penh hosted the inaugural *Total National Grand Prix*. The event has taken place before, but this was the first occasion on which the race took place on the city's open roads, *a la* Monaco.

The circuit began at the Post Office, adjacent to Wat Phnom, and took in a picturesque stretch of Sisowath Quay. In an unprecedented triumph for the organizers, the streets were closed to traffic for the first weekend of the New Year holidays, in favour of a Go-Kart track, complete with devilish hairpin bend. A stand was erected for honoured guests and we were graced with the presence of the governor of Phnom Penh.

Participation was truly international, with competitors from Malaysia, Hong Kong, Singapore, Vietnam, France and Britain, to name but a few. Kenny Yip had travelled from his native Singapore to attend the event. Kenny was quietly optimistic about his chances, in a sense: 'I'll try my best. I don't know.' However, both he and his fellow Singaporean, Anthony Ding, were more concerned about the problems that were beginning to plague the event. In particular, the combination of karts from different engine categories in the same races was creating logjams and confusion as some competitors were lapped time and time again. The aforementioned hairpin bend was a further concern. Precipitously tight, it proved next to impossible on the Saturday and was eventually jettisoned for the second day. Cambodian policing standards were maintained with people walking across the track playing chicken with 130kph vehicles. Ding, a retired banker, rued that it was 'not quite the enjoyable Sunday outing' that he had envisaged.

For the spectators, at least, it proved entertaining.

The somewhat nonplussed Khmer crowds, most of who appeared to have stumbled on the event by accident, were entertained by a seemingly endless procession of karaoke-style Khmer singers. The pretty hand-dancing girls were backed by a live band and accompanied,

intermittently, by a paunchy, middle-aged male singer. The attendant expats seemed keener on the consumption of chilled beer, something they don't usually need an excuse for on a hot April weekend.

Officially sponsored by Total, the prominent presence of Shell produced its own set of interesting problems. The gorgeous Shell girls were banned from the pit for the Sunday, and seemed quite confused by the precise terms of their responsibility. In the interests of fun and, er, rampant capitalism, Shell's representatives distributed flags emblazoned with their emblem to Khmer kids. Police and a security firm, were duly dispatched by the organizers and said flags were confiscated. A police spokesman said: 'It was like stealing sweets from babies.' The plethora of Cambodian national flags was, perhaps unsurprisingly, spared the purge.

Not entirely in contrast to what had preceded in both practice and the heats, the final was forced into a restart after an impressive pile-up. Competitors were restarted in the order in which they crashed, an ambitious proposition to say the least. Some cars were duly placed on top of one another.

Britain's Paul Horgan, the previous champion, failed to claim the title for a second time after an interesting attempt at overtaking landed his Go-Kart on top of a rival. First place was ultimately claimed by his compatriot, Kurt Guy, after an unavoidably close fought race.

The spirit of fun was, at least, maintained in the Junior event, where the seven competitors reveled in the wide-open spaces not afforded the Seniors. This, too, was truly international. Representing France were the talented Salze-Lozac'h brothers, Antonin and Thimotee. They were rivaled by Annaud Kislanski of Belgium, Alexis Chevalier of Cambodia, Coubi Elwere of Vietnam, Luis Xylander of Italy and, from the Netherlands, Kasper Bijker. The level of talent was hugely impressive, with Chevalier ultimately claiming the title for Cambodia.

Meanwhile, the motodop event descended into chaos after competitors got lost and stopped to ask friends for directions. Many subsequently failed to find the finish line but demanded a dollar for their participation. The Ministry for Eggplants is conducting an inquiry.

WHAT DID YOU DO AT KHMER NEW YEAR?

A string of beach resorts with no street vendors? No touts, no hustlers, and souvenir sellers?

Amazingly enough, such a string of beaches still exists on planet Earth. The scene is Vietnam's Phu Quoc Island, in the Gulf of Thailand, you know, the one that causes the unfeasibly huge u shape in the border demarcation between the two countries (still a bone of contention).

We set off from Phnom Penh port at 1.30pm on the speed boat from Victoria Hotel in Chau Doc \$35 the journey taking about four hours (another public fast boat leaves at 2pm \$15). Refreshments and food were served as we skated over the water.

On arrival at the Cambodian customs post our Vietnamese hostess took our passports and arrival/departure slips to sort out the paperwork. This is when our plans started to go astray. It turned out the Vietnamese consul in Sihanoukville had put the wrong month on our friend's visa!



"Cannot go, problem visa."

Our hostess was very helpful, even phoning the Vietnamese customs post to see if they could make an exception.

Not a chance. Rules are rules and they are to be followed so we waved our companion off as he headed back in a dingy to Nek Leung.

Next stop the Vietnamese control. Again our hostess took the passports to sort out the paperwork but our bags were taken off the boat to be put through an x-ray scanner. As seen in airports! Housed in its new building it seemed rather out of place in a small village in the middle of nowhere. Well you have to combat terrorism everywhere I suppose but it might have been more convincing if the customs guys had looked at the monitor as the bags were fed through!

Daypacks and soft bags seemed to be exempt from this process as mine were left on the boat.

A few kilometers downstream what was a deserted river became a hive of river activity. It is quite amazing the stark contrast in river traffic between the two countries.

We were greeted at the Victoria Hotel with a garland of flowers and a welcoming drink.



This old colonial building has been fully refurbished with patios and a pool overlooking the river. The staff and service were excellent and proved very helpful when we learnt that our plan to travel down to Hong Chong the next day to catch the 3pm hydrofoil to Phu Quoc was out of the window as the service had been stopped the week before as the "boat have many problem and break."

This meant that we had to get a taxi at 3am to go to Rach Gia and get the 8.30 am high speed boat for the two hour journey.

After two hours sleep it was not an overly cheerful bunch that arrived on the island. The taxi ride was a nightmare, the boat was huge and comfortable and a few chuckles were raised when we saw that the other boat plying this route was called "Super Dong."

Phu Quoc Island, in Vietnam's Kien Giang province, is about the same size as Singapore, with a population of 75,000 that swells to around 120,000 in the dry season, when fishermen from Da Nang descend on the island to exploit the rich catch. There were those who wanted turn the island into a clone of Singapore, with large

tracts of land marked out for industrial development. But fortunately, such a prospect seems to have been nipped in the bud, with nearly 70% of the Island being declared a National Park at the beginning of March 2001.

Tourism development on Phu Quoc is just starting to take off, with the island's many clean and safe beaches easily outdoing anything that Bali has to offer. The most accessible and one of the most attractive is Truong Beach, covered with buttermilk-creamy sand, stretching for nearly 20 km from Dinh Cau (just out of Duong Dong town) to Khoe Tau Ru. In the south-east, Bai Kem ("Icecream Beach") has superfine white sand. It is said that in bygone days this beach was the exclusive province of wealthy aristocrats.

We stayed at the Tropicana Resort on Truong Beach in great sea view bungalows with a/c, hot water and no TVs!

This beach has most of the resorts/hotels on the island of which there aren't many.

The lack of TV proved a little bit of a shock. Forcing us to remember the art of conversation and book reading. Twenty meters to the water, restaurant, and swimming pool all in a garden setting



proved very relaxing. There aren't many places in the world where the staff give you a Kerosene lamp so you can walk up the beach to try out a different restaurant.

The tracks of Phu Quoc are mainly well-maintained dirt roads, but tree-lined, palm-lined and bamboo-lined. The clearings between the houses are lush and fertile; the houses themselves ranging from simple wooden structures to lavish new whitewashed villas, all with the obligatory TV aerial on a bamboo pole. In the gardens are ancestral tombs, each emblazoned with a red symbol resembling an oriental fleur-de-lys.

South Truong Beach peters out into a narrower but still sandy strip. Perched right on the beach is the headquarters of Phu Quoc Pearls, a joint Australia-Vietnam venture farming pearls in the An Troi Islands south of Phu Quoc. The showroom is already starting to attract visitors.

Today, the south of Phu Quoc Island is quiet. An Troi town, a bustling seaport that before the completion of Duong Dong airport was the most important town on Phu Quoc An Troi is bigger, noisier and more crowded than Duong Dong, but by contrast is totally unphotogenic - unless, that is, it is possible to photograph the smell of rotting fish.

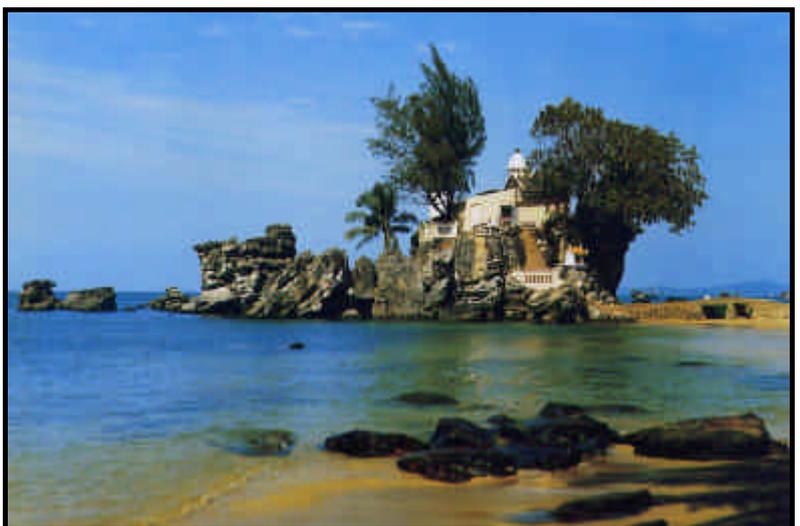
The An Troi islands, off the southern tip of Phu Quoc, are popular for fishing, snorkeling and diving (see Rainbow Divers on the island for trips). But sadly, the corals around the reefs have been badly damaged by dynamite used in "fishing", while native species such as the dugong and green turtle have been hunted to the point of extinction. But all is not lost - it is hoped that with the creation of the An Troi Marine Park as part of the Phu Quoc National Park program, marine life will begin to return.

However, the beaches just north of An Troi are something else again. Top of the must-visit menu is the aforementioned Bai Kem beach.

However, the north of Phu Quoc Island is possibly of more interest to the visitor than the south. The north contains stands of some of the last remaining lowland rainforest in Vietnam, similar to that found in the Cardamom Mountains of Cambodia. On a clear day, you can see from the mini-mountains of the far north right across to the hills of Kampot and Bokor, in Cambodia (you can also get Mobitel reception here as we discovered).

The road to the north from Duong Dong town passes across the northern end of the airport runway (which the locals use as a drag strip) and past the imposing and sobering Phu Quoc War Cemetery. Past a Chinese temple, a side-road leads to Thang Loi beach, where some modest bungalows are currently under construction. Further along, a Y-junction leads NW to Cua Can or NW to the mountains.

Phu Quoc Island is a forerunner of big things to come on the tourism agenda of Kien Giang province. Besides Phu Quoc, over a hundred big and small islands are scattered over a wide area. Other populated islands with favorable conditions for tourism development include Hon Tre, also called Hon Rua (as it is said to be similar to a turtle), 25 km by sea from the provincial capital Rach Gia; Hon Nghe island with abundance of jack fruit, mango and camellia trees; and the 30 sq km Son Rai or Lai Son Island. Thirty kilometers from Lai Son are the 20 islands of the Nam Du archipelago, the largest island being Cu Tron. Of special significance is the Hai Tac (Pirate) Archipelago, consisting of 16 islands in the Rach Gia Gulf. Some of



these islands are said to contain troves of treasure buried by pirates in the 17th Century (don't give up your day job just yet).

A few days on the beach and exploring the island proved very extremely relaxing and so not wanting to ruin this relaxed state the boat and bus trip to Canto then Saigon was scrapped in favour of a \$34 one way air ticket to Saigon.

The fifty-minute flight proved a much easier option. One thing that did amuse us at the airport was the counter selling Phu Quoc fish sauce (the best in the country). Done up in tourist packaging we agreed to split a pack between us. When we tried to buy it that was no problem but we couldn't take it on the plane with us as it was against the rules! Bewildered as to why they were trying to sell it in the airport if you couldn't take it with you we wandered off.

Apart from shopping Saigon did turn up one gem. The best carbon copy of a bar I have ever seen! The Heart of Darkness! Same décor down to the stone heads!

Phu Quoc is a great place to chill out for a break. Unfortunately the

boat no longer going from Hong Chong makes it a bit of a nightmare overland. If the governments could agree a boat from Kep would be perfect but as there are ongoing border disputes very unlikely in the near future. Vietnam airlines offer a return trip including a couple of night's accommodation for about \$190, which is a good deal.

Victoria Hotel at Chao Doc is perfect for a short getaway or you can take their boat onward to their hotel in Canto and then on to Saigon it just depends how much time you have on your hands.

For further information regarding breaks and bookings in the Mekong delta region contact Symbiosis Travel. #147 Norodom Blvd. Tel: 993 092 E-mail: info@symbiosis-travel.com They can make all your bookings and tailor a package to suit you.



SMOOKYVILLE SNIPPETS

"Enterprising Swede croaks it" was the headline in the local rag. Yes, it concerned a Swedish gent, who recently took a long lease on a guest house on the 'Hill'. Having spent a lot of cash refurbishing the place, he took the liberty of going on a fishing trip prior to the official opening of "The Blue Frog" (no jokes eh!). Unfortunately he stopped breathing during the trip, (thoughtless, or what?), arriving back from the excursion in a bag. Presumably the Khmer landlord gets back a fully refurbished property with six months advanced rent in his bin. (Lucky, or what?)

Talking of frogs, a lunatic Frenchman had to be removed from a local establishment by six Khmer security guards, assisted by three barang. It took them a considerable time to restrain him with handcuffs, attaching him to a paddy wagon, before hauling him away. The bar keeper suffered a nervous breakdown shortly after. I cannot remind our esteemed readers strongly enough that Yabba is seriously bad news.

Information has it that the Pizza Man is now plying his trade for the next four months to the good citizens of Siem Reap. Prior to his move he had resorted to throwing petrol bombs at his competitors in Snookyville, whilst an angry crowd of motodops attacked him with sticks and rocks. The locals got up a petition to have him deported, with no less than 50 thumbprints on it. The Police came back waving a Certificate of Insanity from the Pizza Man's embassy, so it looks like its one more strike and he'll be on his way back to Iran, or wherever. For the time being it leaves him free to continue making the most questionable pizzas on the planet from Siem Riep.

The Garden of Eden's latest venture includes Titanic boat trips; cunningly described as a party boat. On its maiden voyage, the two staff and four partygoers returned safely from their mooring, 75 metres from the coast. On the next trip, this time venturing to a far off deserted island, there was an unscheduled and urgent return to the mainland at 3:00 am in order to obtain medical help for one of the passengers who had the misfortune to fall onto a roaring fire whilst intoxicated with many substances, (although my contact say's that she was the intended barbeque). She is expected to be released from hospital within the coming weeks but it will be some time before she needs a visit to a hairdresser.

Carl's rental bike stolen from outside Samudera Supermarket cost him \$800 to replace. He is currently unable to travel as he made the mistake of leaving his passport under the seat.

News has it that Gerry of Chang's has finally called it a day on Cambodia: choosing to leave just hours before the New Year came in, (significant, or what?). Rumour had it, that in the short time he was here, he made more enemies than Pol Pot. Some weren't so happy to see him go, and some were; the majority being in the latter category.

Another leaver? Michael has handed over the reins of Kampuchea Coffee to Gordon, who is still offering excellent ambience, fine coffee and pastries, served by some quite pretty girls.

The Sokka Beach Resort is now open. I don't personally know anyone that has been there yet, as the initial welcoming facade looks so uninviting. (Thinks: time for the marketing boys to get to work!!).

It's been said that the owners of Pet's Place are anxious to find a buyer. Some say that the asking price is not exorbitant. But buyers beware: you're going to need deep pockets to keep this one afloat.

Students of 'Groooovy toons' will be happy to learn that D.J. Simon is due to put in an appearance at the second birthday party of the landmark 'Corner Bar'. Those of you doing a Ph.D. in animated D.J.

styles might prefer to settle for a quiet game of 'Scrabble' instead. D.J. Simon will be signing autographs.

Pigs can fly! The airport is finally open which will hopefully attract more visitors from Phnomb Endh. We don't bite (unless you pay us enough.)

You're all too late! Sham Two/Chamber Pot in Kep is no longer available. The landlord (\$2,500 better off) is now sunning himself on his terrace, being served Pina Colada from an impressive new bar. He is apparently highly amused, unlike the former tenant who is pissed.

No change there then.

More pretentious twaddle, this time by a certain Irish (celebrity) chef. He informed anyone that would listen, and many more that wouldn't, about his extensive training in Dublin's finest eatery, but judging by the cuisine, and his aggressive demeanour, it is suspected that his apprenticeship was served at Mountjoy nick. As an aside, he was last seen heading in the opposite direction to Cambodia.

The Sihanoukville Advertiser wins international recognition for high standards of layout. Being run by an experienced, high flying advertising professional (and his trainee stapler). Said one advertiser, who wishes to remain anonymous, "We are pleased to have been selected for publication and have noticed a not inconsiderable increase of trade following publication." When pressed, the entrepreneur thought that his decrease in turnover was in the order of only 25%, instead of the 40% he was expecting and attributed the relative increase in part to his presence in the journal and in part to his new selection of taxi girls.

There will shortly be a doubling of the number of dive centre operations, increasing now to five or six.

A local dive centre owner went out on a mission looking for 'wrecks'. The mission being unsuccessful; one wag suggested that it would have been cheaper and easier to have looked in the mirror instead or at his own boat.

It appears the publisher of this magazine was threatened by one dive operation owner if he wrote any "shit" about him after an argument about his dive shops e-mail address being left out of a previous story in this mag that had nothing to do with him. All very bizarre and eco-unfriendly.

I would like to state however that he is a very personable, quiet, unassuming man bordering on shy..... Shit, I think he's looking for me now!

It was expected that the Happy Eagle would be renamed the Unhappy Eagle when the new owners found out that their lease had only a few weeks remaining. Shortly after signing the purchase agreement, they discovered that the lease would not be renewed, as promised; as the bulldozers were due to arrive at any moment. They subsequently renamed the business 'Lucky by Nature.' Hmm...not sure about that one, Toby?

Back on the Hill. Rose's Restaurant has moved just around the corner to make way for a Japanese restaurant. (So they say). Watch this space for further developments.

The Chicken Village is being slowly pushed out, but hanging on in there, despite considerable development of the port. Phnomb Endh'ers and Grim Reapers should visit soon. Buy now whilst stocks last!

Congratulations are in order for Leon (Bert's little boy) following his marriage to Rotha. A good party followed at the Anchor Arms, which was well attended by the usual selection of local dignitaries, and pissheads.

A Happy Khmer New Year to all my readers.

Compiled by Titus Rectumus



One flew over the cuckoo's nest

In a pure farce that could have only been written in Cambodia.

Onlookers at a ceremony to destroy Cambodian weapons including Cambodian co-defense ministers Tea Banh and Prince Sisowath Sirirath and US Ambassador Charles Ray. had a close call last month when a Soviet-era anti-aircraft missile took off and zoomed over their heads to steal the show.

"I had to hit the deck. It was coming straight for us," said Sour Thy, a soldier standing nearby. The errant missile, which plunged into the base of a palm tree a few hundred metres away and burned a small patch of grass, was brushed off as a "technical problem".

"Now I've seen everything," said one Western diplomat.

Carried away

A guy on holiday came here for some R& R and female company only to have his plans dashed.

Out on the town the first night he visited some of the local night-spots and had a few to drink.

He returned to his hotel with a lady of the night and from there it goes wrong.

We could not ascertain if it was too much beer or too much enthusiasm or both.

But during horizontal jogging session his wedding tackle got caught in her waist chain resulting in a trip to the doctors and seven stitches in the bit Jews don't have. Needless to say this curtailed any extra curricular activity for a couple of weeks.

Probably the only man who needs a GPS to make love!

Go ahead do it

Mr. Jackson Cocks (is that the correct spelling?) of the Ignorant Republican Idiots wrote to the Daily entitled "Le royal isn't adhering to law." Well neither are you pal as you meddle in another sovereign nations politics. "It's a shame that the only classy hotel in Phnom Penh." Read that as the most expensive. Where visiting



COULD IT BE? The Thai Prime Minister warming up for another riverside attack!

Republican big knobs reside. "IRI has decided to boycott Le Royal." Please could your organization boycott Cambodia. "But until it is resolved in a way that the workers are respected. IRI will take it's business elsewhere." Yipeee! The moon hopefully.

On a serious note the IRI does a lot of good work promoting itself and its screwed up policies. One question we would like to pose is: As you appear to have SRP like a hand puppet so we know where your hand is could you tell us in your opinion how many candle power of sunlight is currently shining out?

Black holes

Surprise, surprise.

In the first two months of this year tax revenues should have been 16% of the yearly projection.

The top three failures are:

- #1. Forestry 2%
- #2. Posts & Telecoms 5%
- #3. Civil Aviation 9%

Any suggestions as to where it has gone and enquiries as to why the corruption law has not been enacted should be sent to: The Government (or whomever is in charge at the moment), Cambodia. Please affix a stamped \$100 bill so it may get noticed.

Hollywood, Interrupted.

Andrew Breitbart of Drudge Report fame and Mark Ebner have penned a scathing expose on the culture of entertainment celebrities, "Hollywood Interrupted" presents the mind-altered behavior of the most reality-challenged celebrities. This excerpt describes what the authors call "pathological parenting" – the strange practices celebrities employ to have or adopt children.

Lara Croft Womb Trader: Anatomy of a celebrity adoption.

Actress Angelina Jolie showcased her most irresponsible life choice when she boasted of her new role as an adoptive single mother to a Cambodian orphan. The twice-divorced, Oscar-winning actress – herself a product of celebrity family dysfunction (her father, Jon Voight, and mother, Marcheline Bertrand, divorced when she was 3) – discovered the boy during a stint as goodwill ambassador for the UNHCR.

Voight revealed that he is estranged from his daughter since they starred with one another in "Lara Croft Tomb Raider" and claimed that his daughter has "serious emotional problems." "She's been staying away from me because she knows I've been trying to reach her to get help," he said. Jolie later called his comments "unforgivable."

Jolie's career has flourished despite (or perhaps because of) a public persona emphasizing the bizarre. She brags of blood rituals, a history of self-mutilation and an obsession with the funeral sciences. Her marriage to four-time divorcee Billy Bob Thornton earned the couple the status as King and Queen of the Hollywood Goth Prom. Tales of Jolie's unconventional upbringing – apparently her mother allowed for her to have a live-in boyfriend at age 14 – paired with Thornton's phobias and colorful past created a portrait of a modern Hollywood couple unwilling to conform to societal norms.

The media was agog with their madness and the lurid tales of bloodletting and wild physical interludes. Earlier, Jolie's behavior at the 2000 Academy Awards exposed her to a flood of gossip when she passionately kissed her "date" after winning an Oscar for her role in "Girl, Interrupted," offering the jaw-dropping line: "I am just so in love with my brother! He just held me and said he loved me. ... I have nothing without you. You are the strongest, most amazing man I've ever known, and I love you."

Up until that point, all assumed her date was her boyfriend or her husband and not her brother.

Cut to Cambodia. Jolie, in a role of her own making, seeks sanctuary through a child – a child she names Maddox Chivan Thornton Jolie, abandoning his given Cambodian name of Rath Vibol. "Maddox was the last child I saw," Jolie confided to Barbara Walters during their "20/20" interview. "And he was asleep. And they put him in my arms and he stayed asleep. And then he opened his eyes and he smiled. And I cried and felt like this kid is OK being in my arms and he accepts me. He

never cried. And ... we just hung out and became friends."

Maybe when he's older, like say, 4 or 5, the two can cut themselves and wear amulets around their necks filled with the other's blood – a show of unconditional commitment to one another. To acquire Maddox, Jolie says she and Billy Bob had to undergo a rigorous background check administered by the U.S. Immigration Service to see if the two would make fit adoptive parents.

"As an actor, it's always weird," Jolie complained. "You're being evaluated, and then you've got these crazy stories about you. And you're being evaluated whether you can be a parent and they say that you're nuts."

The bureaucrats must have forgotten to ask Thornton if he had any intention of being a father to the kid. They also missed a Rolling Stone piece that described the couple as "America's most dangerous marriage." Additionally, they failed to translate one of Jolie's tattoos – "Quod Me Nutrit Me Destruit," which means "That Which Feeds Me Destroys Me" – they signed off on the high-profile, high-risk adoption, anyway.

Lara Croft Womb Trader, like all dysfunctional starlets with a sudden urge for immediate unconditional love, was awarded legal custody of Maddox, who quickly became the catalyst for the demise of the storied alternative couple.

"Billy and I just became very different people," Jolie lamented as scenes of a mohawk-sporting toddler played in the background. "I started focusing on traveling a lot, and knew Cambodia, and really wanted to adopt a child ... and that was before Maddox even came home. And, by the time Maddox came home, we were kind of living apart."

Jolie boasts of a master plan to raise Maddox on her own, splitting time between the United States and the mystical Cambodia to enable Maddox to stay in touch with his native heritage. Missing from Jolie's strategy, however, is a father for young Maddox, as she has ruled out getting married again or having a child with another man – or woman.

Given her estranged relationship with her father and row Billy Bob Thornton, the one male in her life who looks to be front and center for the kid is Uncle James Haven. Maybe Jon Voight can utilize some of his reserve Hollywood cache to save the kid and cast him in a celebrity reality series entitled "Run, Maddox, Run." And why is Maddox's ethnic background worthy of creating a sanctuary for him. Had the child been abandoned in a less PC and less exotic environment, like Appalachia, would Jolie be setting up a compound in the hills of West Virginia so Maddox could be close to his moonshine-distilling people?

It might be safer. "They've removed 48 unexploded land mines so far," Jolie divulged to People magazine. "I'm sure some people will question why I'm bringing my son into an area with land mines.

And, really, who wouldn't be happy waking up to a panoramic view of "The Killing Fields"?

Round trip in Asia

Laos – Yunnan – Tibet – Nepal – Burma – Thailand

Part 3, Tibet: Lhasa to Kathmandu

Story and Photos by Frank Voellm

Travelling Cambodia is great fun and I've always enjoyed my visits to the Kingdom. But SE-Asia is only part of this diverse continent. So, for a change of scenery, I did a long round trip up through Laos to Yunnan and Tibet, then some trekking in Nepal and back to Cambodia via Bangladesh, Burma and Thailand.

The last two months I told the tales of my journey up the Mekong and north through Yunnan, from Kunming via Dali, Lijiang and the Tiger Leaping Gorge to Zhongdian, from where it is a ½ hour flight to Lhasa. On the flight we could sometimes see the Tibetan High Plateau and in the distance even the main range of the Himalayas. The airport is more than 100 km outside Lhasa and a Toyota with a tour guide picked us up, as promised by the TTB. In China, only a couple of government owned travel agencies can sell a ticket and

provide the necessary permit for Tibet and one of them is the Tibetan Travel Bureau. It's of course a scam to legally pick your pocket. It easily doubles the price. They put you on a "group" and provide transportation to and from the airport and then you get a "guide" too. Our group was a Swiss couple and myself and our tour guide was supposed to show us around for 3 days, but we told him to get lost and our "group" dissolved instantly after arriving in Lhasa. At least the Landcruiser ride was enjoyable and we got a first taste of the awesome Tibetan landscape with barren hills and rocky valleys.

One word of caution: If you fly into Lhasa, make sure you don't come straight from sea level. Lhasa is at an altitude of 3700 meters and many travellers experience some form of AMS (acute mountain sickness), even if they come from Kathmandu, which is at an altitude of 1330 meters. Mostly only a headache, nausea or sleeplessness for one or two days, but more serious forms of the disease can be fatal and as Lhasa lies in a valley, the usual cure, a fast descent to lower altitudes, is not possible. Coming like me through Yunnan is ideal because Kunming is already at 1800 meters and Zhongdian is at 3300 meters, so I was well acclimatised, having spent a few days in each place.

Here I was, on the Roof of the World, in Tibet's legendary capital, traditional residence of the Dalai Lama, the "Ocean of Wisdom". Well, entering the town was something of an anti-climax. Lhasa is a rather dusty and dirty place with lots of military and police around and it consists mostly of sprawling and ugly Chinese suburbs. But the old Tibetan town is still a very unique place. Specially around the magnificent Jokhang Temple, where the Dalai Lama himself used to be Abbot (or still is, depending how you look at it), full of

deeply devoted pilgrims from all over Tibet. And of course there is his residence, the Potala Palace, 13 stories high with thousands of rooms, dominating the town and the valley. It's more of a museum these days, rather than the focal point of religious and worldly power of old. At least it's still stuffed with statues and precious pieces of art, although the mass of wealth accumulated here made me think of the Vatican, just like seeing the prostrating, prayer wheel turning pilgrims on the Kora, the walk around the holy sites, reminded me of Rome in the Middle Ages - without flagellants and inquisition of course. But you can feel the intense religious mood wherever you go.

The same goes for the monasteries around Lhasa. I visited two of them, Drepung and Sera, which are like towns in their own right and used to be populated by up to 10,000 monks. Nowadays there are only about 600 monks living in each of them. It's like time travel to walk around the ancient buildings, visiting the assembly halls, the chapels with their statues and libraries, permeated by the (rather unpleasant) smell of the butter lamps, and watching the younger monks enthusiastically practicing their debating skills in the shady courtyards. The Norbulinka or Summer Palace of the Dalai Lama is in a suburb, surrounded by a park with a most pitiful zoo, which is better avoided. In the palace you can see the private rooms of the former spiritual and worldly rulers of Tibet. When I visited, some workers were just carving two typical Chinese stone lions at the entrance. I suspect that this is to demonstrate that Tibet is and has always been an integral part of the country. Changing history in progress. It makes me wonder how the Tibetans feel about that.



In Lhasa there are always travellers who want to go to Nepal by Land. I teamed up with three other travellers and we got us a Landcruiser for the next 6 days. Again, one has to go through one of the two official travel agencies to get the necessary permit (the original permit for travel to Tibet is only good for Lhasa and Shigatse) and again, one has to be accompanied by a tour guide, who is of little help but takes up precious space in the car and cost extra money. We finally got the manager of one agency to take the risk to let us go without one, so we travelled quite comfortably at a cost of 170\$ p.p., all the way to the Tibetan/Nepalese border.

There are several 5000+ meter passes with great views along the way. Climbing up the first one, we passed Peer, a Norwegian mountain biker I had hung out with in the Dunya bar every evening during all these exhausting days of sightseeing in Lhasa. His story is an example of the Red Tape a traveller faces in China and Tibet. He had booked his flight from Europe via Kathmandu to Lhasa and wanted to cycle back to KTM. After the Maoist rebels in Nepal broke the cease-fire last autumn, 6 out of his group of 7 cancelled and he was put in a new group with 2 Belgians. But his new travel mates had 3 weeks, as opposed to his 2, to get back to KTM. So he paid the immigration office countless visits to have the group visa and -permit split up, which cost him a few days. He still wanted to do the trip by mountain bike and, having now only 12 days left, he hired a Landcruiser for 500\$ to transport his stuff, so he would be faster. At least it got him some attention from other travellers: Someone later told me that they had seen a mountain biker "in the middle of nowhere, without any gear! How does he do that?" Well, I guess with money, just about everything is possible...

From the top of the pass there are great views down to the huge Yamdrok Tso lake and up to Nojin Kangsang, 7191m, the first really big mountain on the trip. Along the way you'll meet plenty of beggars and every Tibetan seems to have learned that they should ask for money, if tourists want to photograph them. I generally avoided that and rather didn't take the picture. Although there was one thing I paid for. At some viewpoints, we saw beautifully decorated and saddled Yaks. I found it worth a Dollar to sit on one of the brutes once and look rather frightened while a friend shot a photo with the high altitude lake and the mountains in the background.

The next stop was Tibet's 3rd biggest town. Gyantse is more like a village, weren't it for the impressive fortress and the monastery with it's huge 15th century Kumbum Chorten, a kind of Stupa with chapels full of statues all the way up to the top. The fortress was taken in the course of the British expedition under Younghusband in 1905. The much more numerous Tibetan defenders had been given amulets by the Dalai Lama, which were supposed to divert enemy bullets, but it didn't quite help. The Tibetans had 300 casualties as opposed to 4 on the British side. The Tibetans didn't seem to have learned from that experience because they tried the same amulet-trick again when Mao's troops had a go at them 50 years later. A bit of faith isn't too bad, but I dare say it works better if some modern guns back up the amulets.



A few hours later we reached the Chinese build "friendship" highway again and came to Shigatse, the seat of the Panchen Lama, whose recent incarnation is kept in Beijing (possibly the worlds youngest political prisoner). Again a monastery, and by the time I had visited that one, I thought I'd start screaming and yelling if I'd ever had to see another Buddha statue.

But now we left the cities behind and headed for the serious mountains. After a night in Shegar we came to Rongbuk and the Everest Base Camp (north). The BIG MOUNTAIN presented herself at her very best: not a cloud in the sky. From EBC it's still a tough half-day walk on the glacial moraine to the base of Everest. It's even possible to climb

up to 6400m on the mountain if you have the right gear. You need to have a guide too, and that will set you back \$ 100. In the EBC, there are several big tents, which provide accommodation for a few bucks in spring and autumn, so we spent a very cold night in a large tent at 5200m.



All next day we drove parallel to the main ridge of the Himalayas and the views are truly magnificent. In the evening we reached Tingri where we watched a great sunset over Everest, 8848m, Gyachung Kang, 7952m, Cho Oyu, 8200m and many other peaks. On the last leg across the arid and barren high plateau we reached another 5000+ meter pass with stunning views of Shisapangma, at 8012m the "smallest" of the fourteen 8-thousanders and the only one wholly located in Tibet. The descent to Nepal must be the dream of every mountain biker: more than 4000m straight descent, and one doesn't have to hit the pedals once!



At the border we said goodbye to our driver, and after a final check for SARS the Chinese let us go across the border and we reached KTM the same evening by taxi.

Next month part 4, Nepal: Everest Base Camp (south) Trek

FEAR AND LOATHING IN KAMPOT

Ah, Kampot, fair and blue, your mountains reach the shore

I long for your dusty tracks and karst croppings galore

Rolling down Route 3 in a Camry on a prayer

It gives me great faith and hope with your five sweet bars now there.

And the Mendicant carries down Route 3, and the Mendicant wonders aloud to the driver about the wisdom of driving at 160 km/h, and the driver laughs and turns up the Khmer response to Kylie louder, until the Mendicant can't get it into his head, and is out of his head, and suddenly the new Ministry of Sound mobile unit screams past the train station and the Tela station and the Phnom Khieu, grand old dame of UNTAC-era fashion crimes, which waits for the tribunal to prosecute hoteliers who fail to put the right stuff on channel zero.

Centrifugal force does its trick grinding around the traffic circle and I'm suddenly quite intimate with Diana Ross and the baby she's been holding -- whoa, where did that come from, remind me to ask my lawyer, we've got an appointment at the Bokor Mountain Club tonight -- looks into me and is mouthing something and the small drool splotch is bubbling and suddenly the child has a baseball cap and has grown reptilian with green scales and mauve corneas and is handing me a flyer to Mealy Mystery Tours tomorrow and then small grubs ooze out of its skin, Mealy worms the Mendicant called them as a young lad in biology class, like a sack of flour waiting for the right baker, and I stifle a scream until the cab pauses and fling the door open landing right side down on the front porch of ... shit, I'm in Kampot, and the cab's up and left with my fizzy codeine, and swagger my way I will to a place to crash. (Editor's Note -- a plug for the Blissful G.H. is in order, which in no way condones the behavior of the Drunken Mendicant, and furthermore will probably refuse to serve the D.M. since he has left a small tab at the bar in the name of the Bayon Pearnik.)

The beads of sweat begin to run rivers, and the withdrawal comes on,

and the sun is setting, and I've got to find my way home. Modern Kampot disappears as the traffic circle becomes laterite and the new buildings crumble and rows upon rows of Chinese shop houses as far as the eye can see and a gentleman in starched trousers and a pith helmet taps his coolie rickshaw driver to a halt in front and begins to spew French from his gullet and whips his driver on, leaving a trail of dust, and the Mendicant wonders, we glorify this past in exchange for relief from wedding-cake architecture? The Phnom Khieu hotel reappears and the Mendicant realizes, yes, we do. The loathing is settling in, and repast is on offer at the riverside, and repast is the thing the Mendicant does best.

Pondering the Bokor lost

Or is it film site found?

900 slave lab'ers at cost

Are buried in the ground

All for young Mattie D

To have his drug illusion

And for hearty NGOs

To hamper white intrusion

Glazed and gazing to the right and left I find myself the kind recipient of an ale at the Bokor Mountain Club, the sky raging and thunderheads clapping like 10,000 screaming U2 fans as Bono strips to a gstring shouting that this song is not a rebel song, it's a cover of Frankie Goes to Hollywood.

Minnie Mouse is sitting next to me with a "Made in China" tag pouting its way over her blouse as she sends back her third gin because the mixture just isn't right so I strike a deal with the bar staff to buy the dregs at cost as she lectures passing Chinese school children about their rights to wear non-blue & white uniforms. And then I mickey Ms. Mouse and she trips out of her rattan chair and out into the street hollering something about being an artist, and a trade unionist.

The next thing to appear was a blinding flash of crystalline light, a faint hint of Waterford blue, which beamed from the west and filled the Mendicant's eyes with a vision of Valhalla, where motodops and ambassadors gather around the selfsame table to recount glorious days in the past and future as grails of Australian Shiraz are passed around like riot-scarred bottled water. And the thing after that was a slightly tubby man draped in white cloth and the most amazingly large wings I've seen. He ordered an Anchor, and I leaned in close to hear what he was about to say.

(To Be Continued ...)

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