

4

lessons from a wanderer



NEW YEAR'S GREETINGS FROM

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ANGKOR WAT, CAMBODIA

Tigers and temples Thailand is 90% Buddhist with a temple on every block; 40,717 temples or wats in Bangkok alone. It's also the most racially homogenous country in Asia with 80% native Thai.

Contrary to propaganda and while Cambodia is the only Southeastern Asian country never formally colonized, it wasn't sovereign either. The U.K. managed Siam/Thailand banks for decades and it experienced economic benefits from strong English influence. The government is a constitutional monarchy (like England) and it's illegal to disagree with the king. In fact, he's considered a deity in some parts. Why? His face is everywhere from money to billboards to the back of toilet stalls (OK - toilet stalls not so much).

The big talk in Thailand is the AEC (ASEAN Economic Community) taking effect this month. A consortium of 10 Southeast Asian countries, it will combine their GDPs and smooth the movement of goods anywhere in the region. Those I spoke with thought it would solve transient labor issues and stabilize currencies by reducing tariffs. After my visit, I'm skeptical.

1. be fearless



Bangkok today Thailand's currency is the Baht and they want nothing to do with USD. The city was once a farming community laced with canals but the waterways have since been controlled with locks and the "Venice of the East," urbanized.

I got into town on the heels of the longest reigning king's 87th birthday celebration. King Bhumol Adulyadej, who killed his brother in order to ascend to the throne when he was 18, has staved off 10 coups during his reign. You can believe the press that he is "genuinely popular" or make note that his picture is everywhere and the propaganda, thick. When I inquired about this history, I simply got a smile and was told that dissenters disappear.

The Sri-Nuan dance is beautiful and a mesmerizing method of story-telling. The double-jointed dancers seamlessly pour into each move. The hats symbolize cerebral nirvana through meditation and good works. I'm still not over the effect of the food. It was extreme-spice and I am not accustomed to grasshoppers, scorpions and spiders, all of which I ingested. I also ate more bamboo than I shall the rest of my life. I shall never grow accustomed to eating flooring.

2. be gracious



BANGKOK, THAILAND

3. go big baby

Laos means land of a million elephants At present there are only about a thousand remaining wild and domestic elephants, a population that is continuing to dwindle because of the number of remaining cows and a long gestation of 22 months for a single calf. Asian elephants have been domesticated for centuries and are quite brilliant animals. For centuries and even today, they are used for logging and other feats of manual labor. I watched the elephants play soccer, basketball, darts, catch and paint rather incredible renditions of landscapes with elephant-sized paint-brushes in their trunks.

I also watched them build a large wall quite handily. They are much smaller than African elephants and have pink ears making them quite adorable. They are quick-acting and seem well-trained. Logging was recently outlawed, albeit heavily regulated putting the elephants out of a job. The elephants have been reassigned to tourism and a greater focus has been placed on preserving and re-population. I had just fed this little guy a bunch of bananas and he reciprocated with a big hug, as did the one behind me making this an elephant sandwich.





I will lift up mine eyes unto the hills from whence cometh my help. (Psalm 121:1)

In Laos I touched thousands of years of history. No matter where I go in the world or in time, I find much the same hopes, dreams and human longing for purpose. Laos is an oppressed country that worship gold-leafed statues called Buddhas. In these temples, king and peasant are equalized by life's pain, joy and uncertainty, ever hopeful for heaven and the chance to see loved ones again in a world better than this. They've gotten the framework wrong, but the human struggle is a rhythm all too familiar. Curiously, I recognized similarities in Christianity and Buddhism such as the tree of life and the message of forgiveness.

The impoverished people of Laos also live in the most bombed country in the modern-day world. They drop to their knees daily in one of thousands of temples to ask for good luck. I climbed this mountain to a peak overlooking the valley just in time to see a glorious sunset. Coming up the mountain I passed Buddha after Buddha. My heart went out to the souls searching for the face of God they try to imagine in these images, with attainment driven by good deeds, judged by no one and absent any mercy, they are left to their own accomplishment and its ensuing karma.

4. remember that life is mist



Happy 2015 my dear ones—
 Let's agree to make it memorable.
 I'm so glad you're on this journey with me.
 By the grace of God go I,
 with the love of family & friends.

(clockwise) **1.** Bamboo soup in Luang Prabang amongst other treats and eating rice with both hands; **2.** What's left of an Angkor Wat pillar; **3.** One of many 6-foot monitor lizards I saw having turtle soup for lunch on the Chao Phraya River just outside Bangkok; **4.** New Year's eve at the Borei Angkor in Siem Reap, **5.** the "Lady Temple," one of the few Hindi Temples in Cambodia; **6.** My new Aussie friends from the English-speaking table at the New Year's eve party (14 hours ahead of San Francisco) in Siem Reap, Cambodia.

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