



A Diary of my overland journey from England to Australia

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Thailand (Part 1)

From Bangkok to Nongkai

Thailand currency

£1 = 48 baht.
1 baht divided into 100 stang.
(US\$1 = 20 baht).

Monday 30th December 1968.

Although Calcutta is within the Tropic of Cancer, being December we had felt colder. I don't think this was because it *was* colder, more likely it was because after having been in the warmer climate of Southern India, we had become acclimatised to much warmer weather. Also in Calcutta the period of dusk after the sun had set was a lot longer, giving the impression of a colder Northern City. Rangoon had certainly felt warmer, but we had arrived after the midday heat and had left again in the early morning before the heat had time to build up. So it was



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quite a shock when they opened the aircraft door at Bangkok's Don Muang Airport and the heat from what seemed like a blast furnace blew through the cabin like a wave.

Our plane was on a stand on the far side of the apron to the terminal and we had to walk across the tarmac to the arrivals door. Formalities were very efficient and we passed through the airport in no time at all. We needed to change some money, but expecting the exchange rate to be poor at the airport bank, we only changed a £2

traveller's cheque. We later found the exchange rate was same all over Thailand and there was no currency black market.

The next problem was how we were going to get into Bangkok. At 20 baht, a taxi was out of the question. There was the 29 bus for just 2 baht, but nobody could tell us what the timetable was, so we decided to hitch hike. Much to our surprise we found that in Thailand they drove on the left. We had thought (wrongly) that there was a large American influence in Thailand and fully expected them to drive on the right. What we did find though was a tremendous volume of traffic and nothing was prepared to stop for us. A German boy called Helmut who was also trying to hitch was having no more success than we were. We had hedged our bets by standing near to the bust stop so when the 29 bus eventually arrived, we caught it.

The journey into Hualumpong (the railway station) took just over an hour. From there we were easily able to find the Thai Song Greet from the map that Fred had given us in Calcutta. The Thai Song Greet was the place where all the backpackers stayed, but at 30 baht for a room we thought it to be too expensive and left to try to find somewhere else cheaper. We soon realised that there wasn't much else around, and what there was, was either more expensive or really bad, so we headed back to the Thai Song Greet (TSG) and tried to get a room for the three of us. Unfortunately they only allowed two per room, so Helmut offered to find somewhere else and Louis and I shared a room.

When we got into the room we found that there was only one double bed. When we complained we were told that all the rooms were the same and only had double beds. If we wanted a bed for ourselves we would have to have two rooms. At 30 baht per room we reluctantly decided to share the double bed. As I went to shut the door I was met in the doorway by a very scantily clad Thai girl who grabbed me, and much to Louis' amusement she then pushed me down onto the bed and ... (that part is censored). She was trying to tell me what her services were and how much they cost and was giving me a limited free sample at the same time. She told me I was 'number one', but when I told her 'no', she then said I was 'number ten' and stormed out of the room. This number one and number ten we later found out was slang in Thailand for the best and the worst.

Following on from this we both went for a shower. There was a bathroom at each end of the corridor that consisted of a toilet and a shower. There was also a large tub of water that was full of mosquito larvae, which was meant for general washing. Thinking I would be doing everybody a service to pour the mozzies down the drain, I immediately tipped out the tub of water to get rid of the larvae, then refilled it again with clean water. The next morning it was full of larvae again.

The next thing was to visit the American Express office to check our mail. The Amex office was situated in the Dusit Thani Hotel, about a twenty-minute walk away. Enclosed in one of the letters I received was some more loose-leaf diary pages. I had run out of diary pages in Calcutta and had been keeping notes on various scraps of paper while I waited for some more to come from home. On the way back to the hotel we bought some bread rolls and cheese slices to eat for lunch. Back in the hotel we had



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a feast of bread and cheese while I spent the next few hours copying up my diary from the bits of paper before having an afternoon nap to recover from the previous night spent sleeping on a table in Rangoon.

The TSG wasn't just a hotel; downstairs there was a restaurant, which had become the meeting point for all backpackers in Bangkok. Regardless of where they were staying, they all came to the TSG at some time or other. Alongside one wall of the restaurant was a refrigerator full of bottles of drink where we could just help ourselves. When it came time to pay, the owner counted up the empty bottles in front of you. The lady who ran the place knew whom every empty bottle belonged to and if you moved to another part of the room, she immediately brought all your empties over to the new spot. . The empties were not removed until they had been paid for and a number of people tried to get one over on her, but she was a shrewd cookie and didn't miss a thing - or a bottle. The cook sat in the front, just to one side of the doorway. He was an ugly fat guy who wore a pair of gym shorts and a white tee shirt, which as the day progressed became more and more stained from the things he cooked. Periodically he would lift the tee shirt and scratch himself, revealing a large scar that ran almost the whole length of his stomach and chest. Despite his appearance, he was a wizard with the wok and managed to turn out some really good meals. He didn't speak any English, which was just as well because Louis gave him the nickname of '[gruesome](#)', a name to which he always responded with a smile.

That evening we chatted to a group of British Royal Navy lads who seeing the European faces had decided to come into the TSG for a drink. While we were chatting to them a group of people came in with luggage, having just flown in on the Thai International flight from Calcutta. They all carried the same Thai International shoulder bags that were given free to each passenger. We all chatted until about 10 pm when everybody started to drift away to bed. Louis and I went up to the room and managed to put up our mosquito nets. This wasn't too difficult because there were nails roughly hammered into the wall at various convenient places. Up until now we had hardly come across mosquitoes at all, but from here on it was going to be a totally different story. Once the sun had set the mozzies came out in force and the nets became vital to an undisturbed night's sleep.

Tuesday 31st December 1968 - New Year's Eve.

Despite having to share a bed with Louis, I still managed a reasonable night's sleep, and it was almost 10.30 before we got up the next morning. I went out to a shop just down the road to buy a loaf of bread to have with the remains of the cheese for breakfast. The bread was that lightweight stuff that was more air bubbles than bread and it tasted awful.

The day before I had discovered that the lens assembly on my camera had worked itself loose and I was concerned that it would effect the photographs, so I set out to find a camera repairer. The first camera shop that I went into said he would have to send it off and it would take about a week. I explained that I needed it done quickly, so he reluctantly directed me to a shop that was Minolta dealer. Luckily the dealer he sent me to also carried out repairs and he was able to get on with the repair straight away. I was told it would be about 3 hours work and would cost about 120 baht so I left the camera with him and decided to go off and do some sightseeing on my own.

The first place I went to was Wat Pra Keo. This is the temple that is in all the travel brochures of Bangkok. The photographs in the brochures must have been either touched up or had been



taken a long time ago when the paint job was fresh. Just as in Kathmandu, when I got there it was a disappointment, all the paint was faded and peeling and not at all like the pictures.

I decided to have some lunch and managed to eat it with chopsticks, a knife and fork was not an option. I sat with two guys from Laos and we managed to chat for a while. They suggested that I visit Laos because it was such a beautiful place. Up until that moment I hadn't

realised that it was possible to visit Laos, but they assured me that tourists were allowed to visit and that there were many backpackers in Laos. After lunch I walked through the market and eventually found a tourist office, where I was able to get some leaflets. I discussed the possibility of going to Chang Mai and how to get there. While I was there David, who was on the plane with us, came in also to enquire about Chang Mai.

By the time I got back to the camera shop it was just 4 o'clock and the owner was just putting the finishing touches to the camera. The bill came to 122 baht, and considering the work he had done on the camera, it was a bargain.

From the camera shop I headed back to the TSG, where I met some English guys who had been travelling all over the Far East and were now heading back to England. They gave me travel tips and hotel addresses for many different places, even the name of a hotel in Saigon should I ever want to go there while the war was in full swing. An American guy came in and offered to sell me a student card for US\$1. He had a whole box of blank cards, a rubber stamp, scissors to cut the photographs and a stapler to put them into the cards. If I hadn't already managed to acquire a student card from my brother, he would have been useful. It also gave me the idea of what to do with the letterheads we still had left over from Calcutta. Later on when Louis turned up he joined in with the conversation for an hour. We then went up to the room to shower and change and get ourselves ready to go out to see the New Year in.

Before going out for the evening we had some supper downstairs. I managed to sell one of the letterheads that I had made in Calcutta for 20 baht to a backpacker who was heading in the opposite direction. He wanted to use it to get a discount on a plane fare to Calcutta. We sat around the TSG and chatted until after 11pm, then we went out to try to find some New Year midnight life.

We started walking along the main road and after about 15 minutes we met an American who was living in Thailand. He had a jeep and we all piled in for a drive around. It seems to be the custom at midnight to drive around yelling and cheering. Everywhere we went there were carloads of people leaning out of their windows and waving to each other. Just after midnight we stopped off at an open-air restaurant for a drink. Our driver had somewhere else to go and bade us farewell. We sat at table that had just been vacated by a group of people who had left behind a half-full bottle of whisky and almost a full bottle of wine. We ordered a few more drinks and sat there for about half an hour. We had been driven away from the centre of Bangkok and we were not too sure as to where we were, so we started walking back in the direction we had come from until we picked up a street name we could find on the map.

After walking for about ten minutes or so we came across a large open-air party where everybody was wearing suits. We were only wearing jeans and tee shirts, but we decided to gatecrash anyway. By this time everybody at the party seemed to be a bit worse for wear, having been drinking steadily all evening and nobody seemed to notice us. We found a table and sat there while we finished off the wine and whiskey we had brought with us from the other restaurant. We stayed there until well after 4am before starting to walk back to the TSG. It was a long way to walk and after about half-an-hour we stopped at a

coffee shop for early breakfast. By the time we had finished the busses had started running and we caught the bus the rest of the way.

It was still dark and we had heard that watching the sunrise from behind the Temple of the Dawn from the opposite river bank was something good to see, so we head down to the River. We arrived at the market while it was still dark, but after waiting ages for it to get light we realised

that we weren't going to see anything because the sky was fully clouded over. We were not even sure if we were in the right place, but it was very busy at that time of the morning. There was a ferry crossing from the Temple and there was a constant bustle of monks in their saffron robes crossing in both directions. We eventually gave up and went back to TSG to catch up on some sleep. It was mid afternoon before we woke up and I was covered in mosquito bites from the previous night and was



itching all over. While we had been at the party, the mosquitoes had made a meal out of me, mostly on my ankles and arms, which were both exposed.

Both of us were running out of clean shirts and underwear so we decided to do some washing. When I washed the cheap shirt I had bought in Calcutta, the dye ran all over my other shirts. I tried to wash the other shirts again, but the dye had done damage. I also tried rinsing out the dye from the Indian shirt, but no matter how much I rinsed it, more colour washed out. Whatever I did, the dye kept coming out of the Indian shirt, while it seemed to be fast on my other shirts. Eventually I gave up and hung everything up to dry. It didn't take too long to dry in the heat and fortunately the dye damage on the other shirts was not too bad.

The rest of the day was spent sitting downstairs chatting and eating and trying to recover from the night before. We met a Liverpudlian called Mike and discussed the possibility of going to Laos and Cambodia. Having that chat with the Laotians the previous day had whetted my appetite to see the place. Even though we had slept most of the day we still felt tired and we were in bed early that night and slept like a log.

The next morning Mike came by early to wake us up to go to the Laos Embassy. We had breakfast together first, then caught a bus. Mike informed us that the conductors didn't expect foreigners to pay on the Bangkok busses and just to prove it, we followed his example and didn't pay. When the conductor came around to collect the fare we just ignored him and he went away without asking a second time. We found that this method worked on all busses in Bangkok and from that point on we became bus fare dodgers.

At the Laos Embassy we filled in the application form and paid for the visa. We almost had second thoughts when we found that the visa fee was 100 baht, the most expensive visa so far. We were then told that the Consul would have to interview us before the application could be processed. We had to wait for about twenty minutes before going in to see the Consul who then told us that because we had beards we couldn't have a visa to visit Laos. He said that all men in Laos were clean shaven and us having beards would be offensive to them. We would only be granted a visa if we shaved them off, otherwise it was goodbye. At first Louis refused to shave his beard and asked to withdraw the application, but when we were told that the fee wouldn't be refunded he soon changed his mind.



Louis went to a local barber shop to get his beard shaved and then went back to the Consul to show him the result.

The Consul agreed to process the visas even though I hadn't yet shaved mine off, on the understanding that when we came back the next day, I would be clean shaven.



We then went all around Bangkok trying to find a road map of Thailand without much success. We had been reliably told that Shell distributed free road maps of Thailand at all their garages, but we just couldn't find a Shell petrol station anywhere. We eventually managed to find a very tatty map that somebody went to their car to get for us. This would do to plan our route until we could find a somewhere to get a new map from.

While we were sitting in the TSG discussing the route an English guy came in on crutches. He had fallen into a klong (river / drainage ditch), had broken his leg and was staying here until it was healed. To make money to live, he had been teaching English and had done quite well from it. It seems that a lot of Thai people pay well for somebody just to practice their English with. Although it wasn't usually possible to get an extension to a tourist visa, because he had broken his leg, the British Embassy had requested the Thai authorities to give him an extension and as a result he had been allowed to stay until he was well enough to travel again.

Because it wasn't possible to get an extension to a tourist visa, anybody wanting to stay in Bangkok to teach English used to have to leave the country every thirty days, then come back again on another visa. The Thai immigration department would issue a re-entry visa in Bangkok for 50 baht, the same price as an embassy would charge for a visa outside Thailand, but they still had to leave the country. Usually they would travel up to Laos and just stay overnight in Vientiane before returning. Because there were quite a few people living in Bangkok and teaching English we managed to find plenty of information on the proposed route to Laos.

The English guy's broken leg was almost better now and he was going to have to leave soon. He was heading back to England and was looking to get a student discount flight to Calcutta. I persuaded him to buy one of my letterheads, but before he would buy it he insisted that I find a typewriter to type a letter for him. Although the TSG had a typewriter, it was in the Thai alphabet and was of no use to us. We walked along to Hualumpong railway station and after making some enquiries we found that the station manager had an English typewriter in his office. I managed to talk him into allowing me to use it to type up the letter. Because I had typed the letter I managed to get 25 baht, an extra five baht, for it. We were now well and truly in profit on the letterheads and we still had some left.

That evening the beard came off. It didn't hurt too much. I just cut as much as I could with scissors, then used the battery razor to clean up. I now looked like the photograph in my passport. Today also marked the start of the growth of a new beard, because neither of us intended to remain clean shaven for any longer than it took to get our visa.

When we went down to eat, we met two Australian girls who wanted to go to Laos and Cambodia. They

were looking for somebody to travel with and we both offered our services. We ate together and discussed the route we had planned. The girls wanted to go to a night-club called the Mosquito Bar which is at the end of the number 4 bus route, so we set off to go with them. We got on the bus and travelled for almost an hour, but when we got to the end of the route we found that we had travelled in the wrong direction. By the time we got near to the TSG it was almost 11.30 and we decided to give up, rather than travel for an hour more to the other end of the route. When we went back to the TSG the place was almost empty, most people having gone to bed. We had a drink with the girls then they headed back to their hotel and we went to bed.

The next morning we went back to the Laos Embassy to collect our visas. The Consul inspected our freshly shaved faces and gave his approval before stamping and handing over our passports. We then had to rush over to the Indonesian Embassy to get our Cambodian visas. Thailand did not have diplomatic relations with its neighbour Cambodia, but the land frontier was still open for travel from Cambodia into Thailand, but not the other way. As we were going to cross into Cambodia from Laos, this was no problem. The Indonesians were looking after the Cambodian interests in Thailand, and they were issuing visas on their behalf.

On the way to the Embassy the bus broke down. As we were only about half-a-mile away, we decided to run the last bit, rather than wait for the next bus to come along. We made it just in time and arrived at the Embassy just before it was due to close. Although we could apply for the visas, because it was Friday, we would have to wait until Monday before we could collect them again. While we were at the Embassy we went to the toilet and replenished our everlasting toilet rolls*. (*See original reference in Ankara - Turkey)

From there we went to the offices of Malaysian Singapore Airlines (MSA) which was nearby, where we studied the ABC for flights that would be of help for us later in the trip. We had heard that Indonesia was opening for tourists and we were trying to find out the cost of flights from Singapore to Indonesia, and on into Australia from some point not yet know to us.

Back at TSG we met some girls who had been working in Japan and were heading back to USA the long way around, flying with about 30 stopovers. They wanted to buy student cards and I offered them one of my letterheads, but it wasn't what they wanted. There was a French guy in the TSG who was selling student cards. I managed to get some cards from him and sold them on to the American girls. The French guy gave me 10 baht commission for the sale.

Over the weekend we decided to do some sightseeing in Bangkok. Things got off to a bad start when we overslept on Saturday morning, leaving it too late to go to the floating market.

So we started our sightseeing with a visit to Wat Po, the reclining Buddha. In the travel brochures the reclining Buddha is shown as a beautiful gold covered Buddha. But true to form, in reality the Buddha had great swathes of the gold leaf peeling off to reveal the white plaster underneath. The Buddha was massive, I believe one of the largest reclining Buddhas in the world, but it was still a big disappointment. The disappointment was compounded when we got to Wat Pra Kao to find that it was closed. We



then went on to Wat Sutat (the big swing) to find it under restoration and surrounded in scaffolding.

We also spent quite a bit of time chatting in the TSG to other travellers, including some we had met in Goa and the Jewish boy I had met in Calcutta came through. There was one Australian guy who was a reporter in Vietnam. He was having a few days of R & R in Bangkok. We spoke to some girls who had

just completed the Laos and Cambodia trip and they were able to give us some valuable information on the route. I tried to sell my letterheads to some more travellers, but I had no success. We had got friendly with two guys called Martin and Mat. They had decided to split up and Martin asked us if we would mind if we could meet up with him in Singapore so we could travel through Indonesia together, to which we agreed. Mat was going to remain behind in Bangkok to try to get a job teaching English.

On Monday morning we got up before the sunrise so we could get down to the river early so we could go to the Floating Market. The trips go from the Oriental Hotel but first of all we had to change some money. We haggled with one of the boatmen and agreed a price of 25 baht for a three-hour trip. We didn't buy anything at the floating market because the prices were sky



high, probably because of all the American tourists who seemed happy to pay whatever was asked. It was still cheap to them, but by local standards the prices were double or more. We saw the Royal Barge and the boatman stopped at Wat Arun so we could look around. He eventually dropped us off at a bridge near to the Indonesian Embassy so we could go to collect our passports.

The official at the Indonesian Embassy wouldn't give me my passport at first because

I didn't have my receipt with me. There wasn't enough time left to go back to the TSG to get it before they closed, but we eventually managed to persuade him to get his superior, who checked the photograph and reluctantly handed the passport over.

Next stop was the Thai immigration department. We walked there because it wasn't too far and there was no convenient bus route that ran between the two places and while we were walking the heavens opened up. When it rains in the tropics, it really rains and we both got soaked to the skin. We stood in the immigration office and dripped all over the floor while they issued our re-entry visas. One good thing about getting a re-entry visa in Bangkok is we didn't need to supply any photographs and we didn't have to waste time in Vientiane looking for the Thai Embassy. It was still raining when we came out again, but when you are wet, it doesn't matter if you get wetter.

The rain had set in for the day and we spent the rest of the afternoon in the TSG. Lou and I were concerned about the Australian girls we had arranged to travel with. They were not really travellers, but were on holiday. They had flown from Australia straight into Bangkok and were staying at a much nicer, and for that matter, more expensive hotel. Although they were pretty girls and we quite fancied the idea of them as travelling companions, we were concerned that they wouldn't want to travel at the same level as us. We were also concerned because they were Australians and we had heard that it was not safe for Americans or Australians to travel overland through Laos (more of that later). We were starting to have second thoughts about travelling with them and were both quite relieved when they came to the TSG to say they had decided not to go to Laos after all. We said goodbye to them then went up to the room early to pack ready for an early getaway the next day.

Tuesday 7th January 1969

The next morning we managed to be out packed and breakfasted before 8 am. We caught the 29 bus and went right to the end of the route, which is about two kilometres past the airport. We had been told that hitching in Thailand was pretty good and within 20 minutes we had our first lift in an old bus that trundled along at a breakneck speed of 20 kph. I don't know where the driver was headed, but wherever it was it was going to take him a long time to get there. After half-an-hour and less than ten kilometres later we decided to get off. We thanked the driver and watched the bus slowly disappear in a cloud of its own exhaust fumes, then started hitching again.

The next ride was a complete contrast. The driver drove as if he was being chased. He passed things on the right and the left, overtook on bends and generally did all sorts of things to try to scare the living daylights out of us - and he was succeeding. He eventually turned off just after a police check post and we got out, thankful to still be in one piece. The police took the opportunity to check our passports. One of them spoke a bit of English and took the opportunity to get some free conversation practice with us. He eventually fixed us up with a ride in a Shell petrol tanker to a town called Khok Chik. We tried to get a free map from the tanker driver, but he didn't have any with him, his own map was in a worse state than ours.

At Khok Chik we walked through the town and on the way we had a bite to eat in a local café. While walking we continued to hitch and managed to get a lift in a Pepsi Cola lorry that was headed for Savanaket in Laos. We could have gone with them, but Savanaket is a long way south of Vientiane and we figured it would be a lot easier hitching in Thailand, than trying to hitch back up north in Laos to Vientiane. The Pepsi truck had a blow out on the way and one of the back tyres all but disintegrated. We were passing through a small village at the time and while we waited for someone from a nearby garage to come and fix the wheel, the driver bought us a cup of coffee from one of the roadside stalls. Help wasn't too long coming and we were soon on the way again. The driver dropped us off in Ban Phai in the late afternoon. We decided that because it was going to be dark soon, we would find somewhere to stay for the night. We travelled 250 miles that day in just 4 lifts and we felt we had made good progress, even if we still hadn't managed to get a free map, despite asking at almost every garage we could.

We found a hotel to stay and ate our evening meal in the restaurant next door. The food was fantastic and large portions too. What made it even better were the prices. Everything was almost half of the Bangkok price, and I mean everything.

Up to now we had been easily able to keep within our projected budget of ten shillings a day. In fact, most days we had been well under and even on the occasional days when we went over, it was only by a small amount. Bangkok was only the second place where we had regularly gone 50% or more over our budget. (The other place was Bombay).

The next morning we were on the road early and our first lift was in a Coca Cola truck that took us to the bottling plant about 30 km away. At the plant we were given a free drink and in fact we could have drunk as much as we wanted while we stayed there, but they wouldn't let us take any away. The next lift was in a taxi to Konkaen. The passenger had seen us hitching and asked the driver to stop for us. We got a lift in the back of an open truck. I don't remember much of that part of the journey because I lay down on some sacks and fell fast asleep until Louis woke me up when we got to Udon. We had to walk through Udon for about 2 km before another truck stopped and took us for about 45 km. No sooner had the last lift driven away when a van stopped and took us the last part of the journey into Nongkai, which is a small town on the Mekong River, just opposite to Vientiane. We walked the last few hundred yards to the ferry and reported to the Thai immigration office to have our passports stamped then made our way to the jetty where we hired a small rowing boat to take us over to the Laos side for 5 baht each. Before we could go the boatman had to check our passport to make sure we had been stamped out of Thailand. He only spoke a few words of English, but he managed to get the message over to us that if we didn't have our Thai exit stamp, the Lao authorities would make him take us back again. We then crossed over the deep muddy brown Mekong River to the Laos embankment in a small rowing boat. The boatman stood in the back working a long pole from side to side, somehow this seemed to both steer and drive the boat at the same time.

Since leaving Liverpool 98 days ago we have travelled 13,634 miles and hitched 119 lifts. I have spent 38 pounds, twelve shillings and three pence (£38:12:3 = £38.61) on living expenses and £41:5:10 (£41.29) on other items such as one off expenses, visas, and fares. The most expensive thing so far was the plane fare from Calcutta to Bangkok at £23:4:2 (£23.21). The most expensive day for living expenses was our second day in Istanbul when I spent £1:0:8 (£1.03).

Since putting this page up on the Internet, I have received an email from Bob Potter in Australia. He writes:

"The guy in the TSG whom you called 'Gruesme' was known as 'Charlie' by most of the travellers when I was there. He had a heart attack in 1970 and no longer cooked. He lumbered about, hugely overweight, and died around 1980 - the TSG was closed forever. I remember some very strange cigarettes - they were made of cigar tobacco - with filters and mentolated! Godawful!" [\(Back\)](#)

Laos

Laos Currency:

*Official rate:
US\$1 = 250 kip*

*Street price
US\$1 = 500 kip*

*Equivalent to sterling
£1 = 600 kip / 1200 kip*



Wednesday 8th January 1969



The first thing we saw of Laos was a large sign at the top of the river bank saying "Bienvenue a Laos" Once the boat had docked at the jetty on the Laos side we had to climb the steep embankment up wooden steps to Laos immigration.

Neither of us had shaved since our visas had been issued and by now our stubble was starting to look like beards. Despite the dire warnings from the Lao Consul in Bangkok,

the immigration officer wasn't the least bit concerned about our beards and stamped our passports with barely a second look. We tried to change some money, but the immigration officer told us to wait until we got into Vientiane because the rate at the border was not good. The official exchange rate in the bank was 250 kip to the US dollar, and for traveller's cheques that was all we could expect, but for cash on the street the rate was 500 kip. It was possible to change money in almost any shop and the street rate was so widely used that if anybody went into a bank to change cash they would be advised to go

elsewhere. It was a strange state of affairs. For this reason I have called it the 'street rate' rather than the 'black market' rate.

There was no traffic around and we were not sure on what side of the road they drove in Laos. Being a former French colony I assumed that they would drive on the right, but with their main trade being with Thailand, it was also possible that they would drive on the left. Undecided, we stood on the left side of the road to wait for something to come along. Within a few minutes a truck came along down the centre of the road and we stuck our thumbs out for a lift. The driver stopped and we clambered into the back. We didn't need to ask where he was going because there was only one road and traffic going in that direction could only be going into Vientiane, eleven kilometres away. The driver's steering wheel was on the left, which gave us a clue that they probably drove on the right, but we still watched with eager anticipation for oncoming traffic to see which side of the road he moved to. When he eventually met something going the opposite direction, he pulled over to the right, confirming that the French influence had prevailed.

The driver dropped us off somewhere in Vientiane. Not having a map of the town we were not sure where the cheap hotels were so we dusted off our best school French and asked some people if they knew where we could find a hotel "bon marche" (very cheap). Much to our surprise they understood us. They took us to their car and drove us to the Hotel Vieng Vilay, where after a bit of haggling we got a room for 300 kip per night each.

Once again, we had to share a double bed, but it was a really king size bed, so it wouldn't be too much of a problem. We also had the almost unheard luxury of a wash basin in the room. The first thing we did was to try to put up our mosquito nets, but the nails were just a bit too far away for our strings to reach, so we tried to move the bed. As we pulled the bed away from the wall the whole thing collapsed. There was an American in the room next door and when he heard the crash he came in to see what it was. When he saw what we had done he just collapsed laughing. With his help we managed to put it back together again and we even managed to get our nets up.

The next thing was to change some money and go for a meal. There was no trouble finding somewhere to change money. Because there were so many people vying for our valuable dollars we thought we would be able to haggle for a slightly better rate, but the rate was 500 and even though we tried a number of places, nobody would budge from that figure.

After we had eaten we returned to the hotel to write some letters home. My hands were a bit greasy from the meal so I went over to the sink to rinse them. As I was turning the tap to run the water, the sink fell off the wall and the lead supply pipe cracked. Water started spraying everywhere and the more I tried to stop it, the faster it seemed to run. The American next door hearing the commotion came in to see if he could help. When he saw what was happening he once again folded up laughing. It seems that have us move in next door was the main source of his entertainment in Vientiane. I ran downstairs and brought the concierge up to sort it out. He went out of the room again, presumably to the stop tap because a few minutes later the water stopped running. Having cut the water off he removed the sink and sealed up the broken end of the pipe, promising to fix it again tomorrow. That was the last we saw of the sink because he never returned to fix it again while we were staying there.

The next morning when Louis went out to get some bread for breakfast he returned with a French baguette that had cost just 50 kip. It was so delicious that I then went out to get another one. We then went to try to get some information about boats along the Mekong. We had been told that there were regular freight barges travelling down the Mekong to Savanaket, so our first call was to the office of the large French shipping line Messageries Maritimes. They referred us to the tourist



office, who told us where the river freight boats departed from. We caught a bus to the dock where they were moored and enquired as to when the next boat was going to leave. We discovered that next boat to Savanaket was not due out for another six days. Rather than wait around Vientiane for almost a week we decided that we would have to hitch hike to Savanaket. There were busses, but they were very ramshackle and from what I had heard about them, they were also very uncomfortable. We would try to hitch hike and if we found we were unable to get lifts then we could always get on a bus. No matter how many people they piled on board, they were never full and could always find room for a few more, even if it meant travelling on the roof.

We had spoken to a few people in the Thai Song Greet who had done the trip and had heard a few conflicting reports as to how safe it was, mainly because the road between Vientiane and Savanaket was crossed by the so called 'Ho Chi Minh trail'. There was a unconfirmed story going around about an American who tried to hitch hike south through Laos and apparently came across a group of Viet-Cong who demanded to see his passport. When they discovering he was an American they beat him up, robbed him of everything he had, and left him naked at the side of the road. At least they didn't kill him. The consensus of opinion was that whether the story was true or not, because American and Australian troops were fighting in Vietnam it was not safe for them hitch hike, but citizens of other non-involved countries were quite safe. Britain had declared that they were not prepared to get involved with the war in Vietnam, so we should be safe (we hoped).

We spent the next day looking around Vientiane, which didn't take too long. It was a sleepy sort of place and the French influence was very evident in the tree-lined streets and general architecture. We went to the morning market, but it was about 11 o'clock when we arrived and it was obviously a very early morning market because the last few stalls were just packing away by the time we arrived. We also went to see a monument that had the nickname "The Vertical Airstrip". I don't remember the real name, but it got its nickname because US Aid had given Laos a sum of money to lengthen the airport runway. The powers that be decided that the runway was already long enough for the planes that currently use it and didn't see the need to have a massive runway capable of landing intercontinental flights, so they spent the money on a tall monument instead, hence the name - vertical airstrip.

The next day paid our hotel bill and checked out. We managed to get the bill reduced by 50 kip each per night to compensate for the missing wash basin. Before setting out we bought a load of sweets to eat on the way and a melon to eat straight away. We caught a bus out of town then started hitching and got two lifts in quick succession to Thadeu, the customs post where we stopped to have a cold drink. They told us that this was not the main road South, but not to worry too much because it would join up with the main road soon, though there wouldn't be as much traffic. Despite this we got our next lift after waiting only 10 minutes from the first car that came along. Not long after the customs post, the sealed road ran out and from here on we would be travelling on dirt roads. Although there was very little traffic along the roads, whatever came would stop to pick us up if they had room. The driver of our second lift spoke excellent English, having lived in America for two years. He went out of his way to take us 30 km to Nason.



The next place was a river crossing called Ban Hai. There are very few bridges in Laos and whenever the road has to cross a river there is a ferry. These ferries can usually only carry a few cars or one truck at a time, so sometime a small queue builds up. There are usually a few shops and eating places at these ferries on each side of the river selling drinks and food to the waiting drivers. The lift that took us to Ban Hai was only going to deliver to the shops at the ferry and once we had

crossed over we had to get off and start hitching again. We had to wait over two hours to get the next lift because all the vehicles coming across the ferry were full of people. While waiting

we were able to relax and read, after all we always had about a quarter of an hour's notice when a vehicle came across on the ferry. One of the locals even offered to put us up for the night if we hadn't managed to get a lift by nightfall.

Fortunately we didn't have to take them up on their offer because we managed to get a lift in an army truck to Thabok where we decided to stay for the night.

We started to look for somewhere to stay and some locals offered to put us up for the night. The whole family lived in what was like a large thatched hut. The children tried to teach us to count in Lao and we tried to teach them in English. Needless to say, the children learned much better than we did. We also taught them a few sentences of English and they picked it up very well. The



parents slept in their own room, but the rest of the family and what appeared to be a few friends slept on the floor in the main room. It was not long after 8 o'clock when we all settled down for the night. There was no electricity and it made sense to get to bed soon after dark and wake up by a cock crowing at first light the next morning.

Although it was still very early, by the time we got up everybody else had been up for ages. I went out to get a wash and when I returned Lou was already eating breakfast. After we said



our goodbyes to our hosts, who refused to accept any money from us, we walked to the edge of the small town and started hitching near a small café. While waiting for something to come along we had a drink of ovaltine. A petrol tanker stopped, but only had room for one of us. We didn't want to split up but the driver indicated that there was another tanker not long behind and that he would pick the other one up. I agreed to let Lou go in the first tanker and waited for the next one, but when it came along a few minutes later, it was

full and went straight past. I had to wait for more than an hour before a jeep came along and gave me a lift to the road junction at Paksan where Louis and I had arranged to meet.

Louis was waiting at the road junction for me. We were now back on the main route to Savanaket, not

that it looked any different or busier. It was still a dirt road and didn't seem any wider than the one we had just come along. Louis had managed to buy some melon and bread and we tucked into it for our lunch. While we waiting for something to come along, a formation of bombers flew over heading East, presumably American Air Force flying out of a base somewhere in Thailand, on their way to bomb North Vietnam. Not long after they had flown over we could hear in the distance what sounded like "crump, crump crump", which was probably the sound of the bombs being dropped on the Vietcong positions. Shortly after that the planes flew over again on their return journey. While we waited there, formations went over and back again quite regularly, and each time we could clearly hear the bombs being dropped in Vietnam, which was not all that far away.

There was also the armoured tank like crawling insect that started to make its way across the road. It looked like a large beetle and was about an inch and a half long. We both watched it with interest as it zig-zagged its way towards us. When it was half way over, a car came past and one of the wheels went right over it. We thought that would be the end of it and after the car had gone we expected to see squashed beetle on the road, but it was still walking along as though nothing had happened. When it got near to us we both tried stamping on it just to see if it really was as tough as it appeared, but it completely ignored us and just carried on unperturbed by us both to stamping and jumping on it and eventually it disappeared into the undergrowth.

Our next lift was in a Peugeot estate car. There were already five men in the car and we climbed into the back and sat on some crates with our luggage between us. The car didn't have Lao number plates and I couldn't work out where they were from. The men didn't seem very friendly and before we had gone very far they demanded to see our passports. When they saw we were British their attitude changed and they became very friendly. They wouldn't say where they were from and just laughed when we asked them. They drove very fast over the corrugated dirt road and before long we came to a ferry where there was by Lao standards a long queue. There were cars, trucks and busses all waiting to cross and hawkers were going up and down the queue selling all sorts of thing. The driver bought us a can of beer each, the first beer we had drunk since leaving Bangkok. One of the busses that pulled alongside us in the queue there were some Australian girls we had met at the TSG and we chatted to them through the window. Their bus was packed and they had paid 1500 kip each for the fare to Savanaket. They told us that the bus didn't seem to have any suspension and the ride was the most uncomfortable they had ever been on. Our lift wasn't much better but at least we were seeing much more of Lao life and it wasn't costing us anything.

I got out for walk while the car was in the queue and after asking some of the locals I discovered that the car we were in had North Vietnamese number plates. This left me feeling very concerned about the contents of the crates we were sitting on. Once we had crossed the river they drove non stop until just after Thakek, where we were dropped us off at the side of the road, they then turned left down an almost invisible track and disappeared into the bush in an Easterly direction. When we looked at the map we discovered that in relation to Vietnam, the spot where they had picked us up was just to the north of the Demilitarised Zone (DMZ). They had driven around the DMZ on the Laos side of the border where they could travel freely and we were now just to the south of the DMZ. Presumably they were now heading East to infiltrate into South Vietnam. Thinking back to when they had demanded to see our passports I suddenly realised that probably the story of the American hitch hiker was true after all.

It was mid afternoon when we were dropped off and we stood at the side of the road for ages, but nothing came along with any room in it. There was a village a few hundred metres off the road and a few of children came to watch us. I noticed that one girl had a splinter in the back of her hand so I used the tweezers in my first aid kit to remove it. She went away again and shortly afterwards came back with her mother who had brought a meal for us. The girl was now carrying a baby girl and she had what seemed to be an infected cut on the palm of her hand. The cut was full of dirt and I used one of my antiseptic pads to clean it out, then put a sticking plaster over the wound. Before long we were surrounded by loads of people with a variety of ailments all hoping that we would be able to cure them. We still didn't have a lift so one of the locals went and got his car to take us into town. Half way there he stopped and left us in the car while he went into a house. He wasn't in there very long but when he

came out again he seemed to be in a trance.

We decided not to carry on with him and got out of the car. We then discussed where we were going to spend the night, as it was now getting dark. Louis wanted to walk back to the road junction and see if the people from the village would put us up, while I wanted to walk further into town and find somewhere to stay. We had an argument about it that I eventually won. We started walking into town and asked a man if they knew where there was a hotel. Detecting our poor quality school French, he answered us in fluent English and offered to let us spend the night in his house which was not too far away. We walked to his house and put our bags inside. He then excused himself because he had somewhere to go so we decided to go out to find a place where we could eat. He directed us the bus station that was nearby and we had a meal in café just opposite. While we were eating we got talking to a doctor who also spoke excellent English. He bought us a drink and moved over to our table to join us. We chatted for at least an hour and when we got up to go the doctor paid our bill.

Back at the house, the owner introduced us to his wife, then showed us to a room with two really comfortable beds in it. There were no nails in the wall to hang our nets and we spent

ages getting them up. We even had one corner tied to our packs. Washing facilities were crude. We had to scoop some water out of a large earthenware pot and get washed in a bowl. It was still only 8.30 pm by the time we got into bed, but in Laos everybody seems to turn in early.

In the morning our hosts gave us breakfast and also packed some bread for us to eat later. After a few lifts we stopped at a small village where we took a photograph of a group of children



standing outside a typically Lao house. One of the children brought along a tame monkey and I held it while Lou took my photograph. He took ages setting up his camera during which time the monkey shit all over me - twice, much to the amusement of the children. We soon got a lift in a US aid truck all the way to Savanaket, where we were dropped off in the centre of the town.

Savanaket was a bustling place, much busier than Vientiane. Presumably because there was a frontier with Thailand nearby and Savanaket was the border town. Unlike Vientiane where the river could only be crossed by boat, there was either a ferry or bridge over the Mekong at this crossing, because there were plenty of trucks and cars in the town with Thailand registration numbers.

We started to walk out of the town and soon got a lift in the back of a truck full of tyres all the way to Pakse. Another passenger on the truck was a Lao student who was studying English and he spent the whole way getting some free practice. The road was very bumpy and sitting on top of the tyres the bumps were amplified. It was very hard on my back and to compound things even more, I was suffering from regular stomach cramps. I had been constipated for the last few days, probably due to the condition of the toilets we had been using I somehow didn't feel like going. After bouncing up and down on the tyres and the cramps, I was really glad when we finally arrived in Pakse just as the sun was setting.

In Bangkok we had been advised to spend the night in a Wat (Buddhist temple) by the river. The monks were delighted to allow us to stay and crowded around to practice their English on us. I hadn't showered since leaving Vientiane and was desperate for a good wash, so I stripped



down to my underpants and went down to the river to bathe. The part of the embankment we were on was very slippery and before I knew what was happening I had slid down into the river, followed close behind by Louis. We took advantage of the situation and had a good wash and a swim around before going back to the Wat. Because our towels had gone into the river with us, we had to dry naturally in the warm night air before we could get dressed again.

The guy in Bangkok had also recommended us to eat in the Hong Ky restaurant, which we eventually managed to find with a bit of difficulty. The meal was awful, but the owner Jesse Cheng spoke fluent English and was able to give us some good information about the road to the Cambodian border. He even said he could get us some Cambodian money at a very good rate. He gave us some string to put up our mosquito nets and we arranged to come back again the next morning when he said he would have the Cambodian money for us. It was after 10 by the time we left the restaurant and the streets were deserted. We got back to the Wat and using our new string we put up our nets and went to sleep on the reed flooring.

Tuesday 14th January 1969

We got up at 7 and went for a swim in the river. Our towels had dried out overnight and this time we were careful not to go near the slippery bit. We then went to the Hong Ky for breakfast, but by the time we were ready to leave, Jesse had still not arrived and nobody else knew anything about changing money. We didn't want to wait around so we started walking.

We got a series of lifts and eventually ended up at a road junction where any traffic that came along would turn off before it got to us. Eventually we got a lift in a truck. Lou got in the back but the driver wanted one of us in the cab. It soon became obvious why. There was no windscreen and the door kept flying open once or twice a minute. My job was to keep closing it again and I was kept busy throughout that lift continuously slamming the door. The driver had said he was going to the border, but when we got to Khinak he stopped and told us to change to another truck that he was going to travel in from there.

In the next truck there was a German guy we had met in the TSG in Bangkok. He had been waiting for the driver to come along and we were soon on our way. The driver took us round to the immigration office to get our passports stamped out of Laos, then headed for the border. On the way we picked up two more hitch hikers who were walking along the road, a Kiwi who introduced himself as Titch and an Australian called Mike Phillips who was a medical student in Perth.

Five kilometres down the road we came to a passport check. We all had to get out to have our passports checked, and to make sure that we had got them stamped back in Khinak. The official started writing all the details in a big book and it was taking ages. After he had taken Louis and Mike's details, the driver said he couldn't wait any longer and drove off without Titch and Me. As the truck was leaving Louis shouted that he would wait for us at the border. We had to wait patiently for the official to write everything down in his book before we could leave. Our luggage had gone with the truck so we didn't have to carry it and once we had our passports handed back we set off on a 6 kilometre walk to the border. While we walked no other traffic passed so we couldn't hitch hike and we had to walk all the way. Not having to carry our luggage we were able to make good time and despite the heat we covered the distance in a little over an hour.

Cambodia

Cambodian Currency:



Official rate: US\$1 = 24.6 riels

Black Market US\$1 = 60 riels

Equivalent to sterling

£1 = 69 / 144 riels



Tuesday 14th January 1969

When we arrived at the border the Lao truck was being loaded with goods from a Cambodian truck. It seems that although the two countries trade, the trucks don't drive over the border but simply swap goods at the border. They were just finishing the job as we arrived and our luggage was already on the back of the now empty Cambodian truck that was shortly going to set out to drive to Stung Treng.

We reported to the immigration officer and had our passports details noted in the usual large book. We were then given a piece of paper to take to the immigration office in Stung Treng where we would get our passports stamped. We then went out to get on the truck that was going to Stung Treng. The truck driver demanded we pay US\$2 each for our fare and insisted in being paid in US dollars. We told him we didn't have any dollars and he immediately reacted by picking up our bags and throwing them down from the truck. This annoyed Louis so much that he jumped up on to the truck and punched the driver. This didn't help matters and the driver then put up the price to \$10 each. The German guy had already paid his \$2 and was sitting in the cab waiting to go. Louis, Mike, Titch and I decided that we were not going to get anywhere with this truck driver after Louis had clobbered him, so putting our packs on our backs we set off to walk into Cambodia.

After we had been walking for a short while the truck came along. We tried to be cheeky and put our thumbs out to hitch but the driver just sounded his horn and waved his fist at us as he drove past. After we had been walking for two hours we had covered just 5 km. It was tiring carrying our bags in the heat and we would take a short rest at each kilometre marker post. At each kilometre the rest period got longer and longer and before long it got dark. Although we were well south of the area where Vietcong were operating, we couldn't help but worry about running into a VC patrol trying to infiltrate from the North to the South via Laos and Cambodia. A large black car went the other way to the border and on

the way back he stopped and picked us up. He took us 8 km to a road junction where he dropped us of and turned right towards a village called Osvay. He said he was coming back at 8 o'clock and would pick us up again if we were still there.

There was a half-built house at the junction and we sat in it and lit a fire while we waited. Titch told us that he was hoping to try to get into Vietnam overland. Mike was a medical student from Perth and was travelling around the area during his summer holidays, which in Australia is in December and January. The fire started to die down at about 8.30 and we all decided to walk the 2 km into Osvay to find somewhere to stay for the night rather than rely on a car that may or may not return. We started walking and had gone 1½ km when the taxi came back along the road and picked us up. We later heard stories about Osvay from other travellers who had tried to walk in and had been chased out by men with guns. They all said that a black car came along shortly afterwards and gave them a lift. Many years later we found out that it was a local headquarters for the Kymer Rouge. I can only presume that whenever some unwanted visitors got near, the car was despatched to get rid of them.

He drove us down to Stung Treng. By this time I was exhausted and slept for most of the journey. The road finished on the other side of the river to Stung Treng and the driver dropped us off headed back, presumably to Osvay. There was no bridge over the river, nor were there any boats. We could see the lights of Stung Treng on the other side, but the river must be



about a mile wide at this point and even though we all shouted and waved our torches trying to attract attention, nothing came over to us. We eventually gave up and started to settle down to spend the night there when a ferry came over. When it docked a car drove off and we ran on board before they could go off again without us.

Although it was nearly 11.30 by the time we got into Stung Treng, yet we managed to find a restaurant still open, well actually he was just

closing, but the manager took pity on us and stayed open a bit longer. On his recommendation we bought a bowl of rice each and two bowls of soup Chinoise (Chinese soup) between us. A bowl of soup Chinoise was a meal all by itself, consisting of generous helpings of noodles, vegetables and chicken in clear broth. The bill came to just 10 riels between us, but none of us had any Cambodian money yet, so had to pay in Lao kip. The manager was not too pleased with that, but he still gave us some more food free because we were his last customers of the day and it would only be thrown out when he closed.

It was now well after 1am and we had to find somewhere to sleep. We found a Wat but it was deserted, so we just kipped down and went to sleep. The next morning I was woken up by the sound of a large group of children singing a song about Cambodia. Nobody seemed to be bothered by the four foreigners sleeping on one corner of the Wat, so we just packed up and left as quietly as we had come.

We had another bowl of soup Chinoise each in the same restaurant and the manager was prepared to accept payment in kip again. We then went managed to find somewhere to change money and at last we had some Cambodian riels. The next stop was the immigration office to take our pieces of paper and get them exchanged for a passport stamp. (See [footnote 2](#) for further comment on Stung Treng)

The next place we wanted to get to was Kratie, but we found that all the busses leave early in the morning. We had also missed the boat, so the only option was to get a taxi. The taxi fare was 80 riels and we all piled in to the one car. At Kratie when we came to pay we offered the driver a US dollar and told him it was worth 80 riels, which he readily believed. We then tried getting the boat to Phnom Penh, but the next boat wasn't until the morning.

There was a Cambodian boy also enquiring about boat times and he spoke English. He said he was going to spend the night in a Wat and he took us along to meet the monk who was in charge. He said that because we were foreigners we would need to get permission from the chief of police beforehand. He had no objection and as long as the police chief said yes, it was

OK by him. We all went to the police station, but the chief had already gone home. The policeman on duty gave us his address and we all walked about a mile to his house, where we were welcomed in and given tea and biscuits while he copied down all the details from our passports. He gave us a note for the monk and we then left to go for a meal.

We had enjoyed last night's meal and so we decided to have the same thing again tonight.

The Cambodian guy joined us, but he was really baffled when we ordered a bowl of rice each, but only two soups. He kept questioning us because he didn't understand what we were trying to do. Once the meal was over we went back to the Wat.

When I woke up the next morning our Cambodian friend had gone. We thought he had left us, but he returned soon after with some fried bananas for us all. We left our luggage in the Wat and went to have a look around Kratie and to make sure of the boat time. We were starting to get addicted to the soup Chinese and we all had a bowl before going back to collect our luggage.

We got to the pier head in good time for the boat, but the police stopped us from boarding. They took us into the office and made us all fill out a form before they would let us get on the



boat. We eventually made it on board the ferry just ten minutes before it sailed. The river ferries were quite large and for the next 18 hours we just sat on the boat and watched Cambodia pass by. We passed many small villages, and stopped now and again to let passengers get on and off. At one stop the bank was steep and the passengers had to climb many steps to get to the top. We watched as all the freight was hauled up from the boat on rails that had been set into the

embankment for the purpose, the all the freight that was to be loaded was slid down into the hold. I couldn't help but wonder what would happen to a particularly heavy item if they let it

go near the top of the bank. I reckon it would slide down and punch quite a large hole in the ship.

When it got dark we found a bit of deck to spread out our sleeping bags and go to sleep. The boat carried on through the night and at one stop at 3.30 am a policeman came on and woke us all up to check our passports. Louis was sound asleep and when the policeman shook him to wake him up he lashed out and gave the policeman a hell of a thump. We all looked on horrified as the policeman took out what seemed to be a bayonet and started prodding Louis with it to wake him up. I had to call out to Louis not to sit up suddenly in case he did just that and sat up into the bayonet. The policeman took our passports away for some reason and Titch followed him to make sure he brought them back.



Soon after it started to get light and I went to have a wash. Always game for a laugh we started fooling around and soon had a small crowd around us. I played the flageolet and Mike



handed around a hat, but nobody put anything into it. With the police checking us out in Kratie we had somehow got on board without paying our fare and nobody had come around to collect it. Needless to say when the boat docked at 6 o'clock and we got off quite sharply.

The only thing we had been able to get to eat on board was a few rolls that we bought from a hawker who came on board at one of the

stops the previous evening. We were all starving and our first stop was for a soup Chinoise at a quayside restaurant. The road outside was very busy, mostly with cycles and yet another variation of the three-wheeled cycle rickshaws. These rickshaws are found all over the East and each country seems to have a slightly different variation in construction to the next. The Cambodia ones have the passenger sat behind the driver facing backwards, so you could see where you had been, rather than where you were going. In Cambodia they are called a "cyclo puss", a name which conjures up visions of a large cat on wheels.

The tourist office in Phnom Penh was extremely helpful and told us everything we wanted to know. They even recommended a Wat where we would be able to spend the night. We went straight to the Wat but found that there was some sort of Monk's convention on and the place was crowded. We were directed down the road to another Wat, but the head monk couldn't be found to ask permission to stay. We were allowed to leave our luggage there so we didn't have to carry it around with us all day.

The Indonesian Embassy was very near to the Wat and we went in to enquire about tourist visas. At first they said they didn't issue tourist visas, but we said that we had heard that they were going to start issuing them soon and asked when this would be. The official went away to enquire and came back a few minutes later to tell us that they have now started to issue them and handed us some forms to apply. We made our applications and were then told to come back the next day to get our passports stamped with the visas but when we explained that we might not be able to come back the next day, he said he told us to come back in the afternoon. The visa would normally cost US\$5, but the rate of exchange that the Embassy applied was the official one, so the cost was only going to be 125 riels, which applying the

black market exchange rate that we were working to the visas were only going to cost \$2.

I went for a walk with Mike and we found another Wat and asked if we could sleep there, but once again the head man was out and nobody else could give us permission. We then went back to join Lou and Titch and while we were discussing what to do next a man approached us and started to speak English. He was obviously trying to practice his English and he asked us if we would join him for lunch, to which we all readily agreed. He then proceeded to lead us all around Phnom Penh, going from place to place. Goodness knows what he was looking for, but each time we thought he had found somewhere, he moved on again to somewhere else. We ended up in a very posh restaurant somewhere in the centre of the city.



I have to say, the meal was far more than I would have

expected from him, so was the standard of the place he brought us to. The meal started with hors d'ouvres. The next dish was crab. Louis and I looked at each other because being Jewish, crab was on the list of things we were not supposed to eat and not only that, we hadn't the slightest idea of how to eat it. In the end rather than insult our host, we decided to give it a try and it wasn't too bad. By the time the next course arrived and we still hadn't been struck by lightning we felt a bit more relaxed. We had a main course followed by dessert and coffee and the bill came to 70 riels each, an absolute fortune for a Cambodian, but our host paid the bill. At one point just before the main course our host excused himself and disappeared for a while. We were all reluctant to start the main course in case he had done a runner, but he returned again after about 15 minutes.

After we had said our thank you and goodbye to our host, we went to pick up our visas, then spent the afternoon looking around Phnom Penh. The first stop was the Prince Norodom Sihanouk museum. We had thought that it was going to be an ordinary museum that the Prince had given his name to, but we were wrong. The museum was in fact all about the Crown Prince. Every exhibit in the museum was about him and his life. All his cast off clothes were on display,



letters he had received from other heads of state, even his old school reports. At that time the people of Cambodia loved Noredom Sihanouk just as much as he loved himself and everybody used to wear a badge with his picture on it. He used to broadcast on the radio every day for hours on end and even formed a film company so he could make movies in which he was the star. He had recently organised the Phnom Penh "international" film festival in which most of the entries were Sihanouk's own films.

We then walked to the Royal Palace and on the way we had to walk across a large green parkland area. In the middle of the park there was a cremation taking place and we went over to have a look. The cremation was

a grand affair and everybody seemed to be in a party spirit, which was the custom in Cambodia. The mourners invited us to join in and gave us all drinks. Everybody was taking turns at being

photographed sitting beside the burning coffin. We even posed and had our own photographs taken.

We then went to see the Royal Palace. There was a guard standing outside the main gate and as we walked along the pavement he made us walk out into the road as we passed the gate. Nobody was allowed to walk past the gate on the pavement. Louis and I considered it a challenge and we both approached together from opposite directions. As the guard was



chasing one of us off the pavement he couldn't stop the other from walking along the pavement past the gate. When he realised what we had done he became very angry and we decided to disappear quickly.



We came across a group of monks who spoke English and we walked with them to the museum. This one was the real thing and included a tour of the Palace, but when we got there it was closed. We then all piled into a taxi to go to the Phnom, a monument that appears on all the Cambodian coins, notes and stamps. At the Phnom we took some photographs and walked around the park for a while before stopping for a rest. We had not really slept the night before and it was now starting to catch up on us, so we each lay down on a park bench and slept for about half an hour.

Mike was running low on film and on the way back to the Wat he went into a few shops, but with a roll of film costing almost 500 riels, he had second thoughts about buying

one. We also stopped at the Post Office and wrote a short letter home.

Back at the Wat the head man had returned, but when we asked if we could sleep there he said no. Mike and I then went out to find another Wat and on the way it poured with rain and we got soaked to the skin. The next Wat we came across the head man saw us soaked and dripping and must have taken pity on us and allowed us to stay. We went back to tell the others but by now Titch had gone missing so we left a message for him and the three of us went off to the other Wat, taking Titch's rucksack with us. The head man showed us to a room where we could sleep and we laid out our sleeping bags, and set up our nets ready for the night, but there was still no sign of Titch. Louis went back to the other Wat and found him. He hadn't seen our message and was wondering where we were.



By now it was getting late and we started to look for somewhere to have a meal. Wherever we looked was either far too expensive or was closed for the night. Eventually we found a place



that would do the usual soup Chinese and rice for us. How I made it back to the Wat I don't know, but I was so tired that at one point I sat down for a minute and fell asleep and the others had to wake me up again. If I had been on my own I would have probably slept all night. It was after midnight before we all got into bed and needless to say, we all slept like logs.

The next morning we were all awake bright

and early. We said our goodbyes to Titch, who was heading off to Saigon overland and had to leave early to catch the bus to Svay Rieng, a town near to the Vietnam border. We also wished him good luck because we felt he needed all he could get. I had my doubts as to whether he would be allowed to enter Vietnam via the land border, but he was hell bent on trying it.

We left our bags at the Wat while we went to have breakfast. After eating we went back to the Royal Palace museum and tour, but the entrance fee was 50 riels each for foreigners, even though it was only 10 riels for Cambodians. We tried to talk them into letting us go in as Cambodians, but they wouldn't allow it, so we decided not to bother. This was partly because of the price and partly because we only had about 75 riels between the three of us and we all desperately needed to change some money.

Finding somebody in Phnom Penh to change money was not an easy task. Whenever we asked somebody where we could change money we kept being directed to a bank. The black market was not making itself easy to find. We persevered and eventually found somebody to change money and got 62 riels to a dollar, an improvement of 2 riels. Once we had changed money, Mike went to buy his roll of film. We had offered to lend him a roll of ours, but we were using Kodachrome transparency film and he wanted prints.

We waited at the Wat for Mike to come back and when he returned we all collected our bags and started walking to the bus station to catch a bus to Siem Reap. On the way, Louis fell over and nearly hurt himself badly when he landed awkwardly with his frame landing on top of him. We both had to lift the frame off him before he could get up.

The bus fare to Siem Reap was 100 riels each, a fare that we felt had been inflated because we were foreigners. We haggled with the driver and eventually he agreed to take the three of us for a total of 200 riels, which in my opinion was still too much. We later found that the other passengers were only paying 70 riels each for their fare, but they were Cambodians. Everybody else put their luggage on the roof where it sat on a large wooden rack, but was not tied down. Feeling that it was not too secure, we kept ours inside with us. This caused us to have an argument with one of the passengers, but we still insisted on keeping our luggage inside with us and eventually he gave up. The passenger we had argued with spoke excellent English and eventually we became very friendly and chatted for a lot of the journey.

The bus set off and we travelled for about an hour before coming to a stop in a long queue. The queue was for the ferry crossing across the Tonle Sap and we had to wait for four and a half

hours before our bus eventually got onto the ferry. There was a new bridge almost built, but it wasn't quite finished yet and was not due to open for another few weeks. By the time we were across it was dark and much to our disappointment, we couldn't see anything of the countryside. The bus eventually stopped at Kompong Thom, a town on the North shore of the Tonle Sap (Great lake). We had a half hour stop in Kompong Thom and took the opportunity to have a meal of - what else but



soup Chinoise. In the bus station restaurant we met a Catholic Priest who was also travelling to Siem Reap on another bus. We sat together while eating our meals and discussed travelling in Cambodia. When the bus continued its journey it was less than half full, the other passengers had got off in Kompong Thom, including our English speaking friend. Because there was now plenty of room in the bus, we were all able to stretch out and have a sleep.

We eventually arrived in Siem Reap at exactly midnight and the place was almost deserted. Louis went into the bus station café to ask if there was a Wat nearby where we could sleep. There was a man sitting having a drink and he invited us all to join him. He bought us all a drink, then he invited us to come and stay at his home. He lived a bit outside the town so after we had finished our drinks he called a couple of cyclo puss's and we all piled in and went to his house. His name was Meas-Sarithi and he was a waiter at the Auberge Royal, a first class hotel situated opposite the entrance to the main temple of Angkor Wat. His house was quite near to the hotel and had the luxury of a relatively modern bathroom where we were able to take a bath before going to sleep.

It was fortunate that the house had a bathroom because Mike was up for half the night with diarrhoea. By the morning he had stopped running but he wasn't feeling at his best. Meas-Sarithi offered to lend us some bicycles to tour the area, but Mike didn't feel up to cycling around and said that he would rather go on foot. Although Louis and I would have loved to take up his offer we decided it would be unfair to leave him behind. So bright and early we all set off on foot to walk around Angkor Wat. That was a big mistake, because we didn't realise how well spaced the temples were. Although the total area of Angkor Wat is more than 500 square kilometres, the area where the most important buildings are was still in excess of 150 square kilometres and riding bicycles we could only expect to see a small portion of it. On foot we were going to see even less.

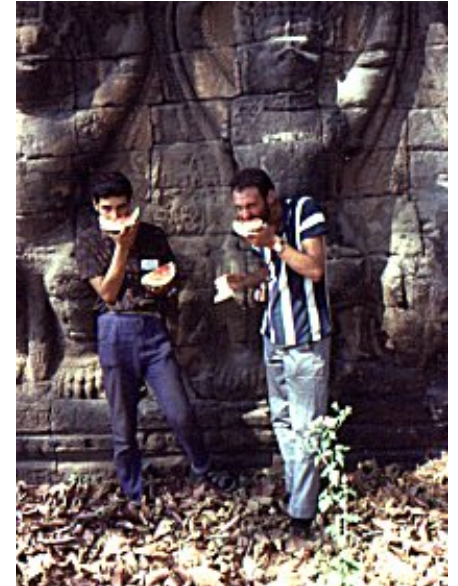
After what seemed hours of walking we eventually came across our first Angkor ruin, the Bayon. It had been built during the 11th and 12th centuries and used to be the centre of the great city of Angkor Thom, which had a population of hundreds of thousands. The only people here now were the occasional tourists and their guides. The city had originally been surrounded by 16 kilometres of wall. The Bayon itself consists of a mass of 49 square towers, carved on each of its 4 sides with the face of a god. Mike said "good grief, 200 smiling gods". Maybe we were not at our best, having walked all the way in the hot sun, but the past glory of the ruins were lost on us and they just seemed like a load of lumps of rock. Agreed, the lumps were many years old, having been built by the Khmers a long time ago. Even so it didn't do an awful lot for us at the time, which in view of the size, carving detail and complexity of the place, was probably an unfair judgement.



Occasionally we would come across hawkers travelling around on bicycles selling a variety of souvenirs as well as drinks at inflated prices. At one point a group of hawkers had stopped to try to sell us various things. We bought a melon from one of them and borrowed a sword from another to cut the melon up with. Three ladies stopped selling paintings of the various Angkor ruins and rubbings from the main Angkor Wat temple. We haggled with them for almost an hour before we eventually

bought some rubbings. One of these rubbings I later had framed and it is still hanging on the wall in my house to this day.

One thing we just could not find was somewhere to eat. There were no souvenir stalls at any of the ruins, just the mobile hawkers, and although they had plenty of drinks, none of them had any food to sell. At Ta Kéo we came across a group of school children who were all very excited to try out their English and French conversation on us. We asked them directions and if they knew where we could find somewhere to eat and they all gave us some of their water and bread. We spent about half an hour with them as they looked around one of the ruins.



By 2 o'clock we were all exhausted. We found a nice shady spot just off the road and decided to stop for a rest. Before long we had all dozed off and slept for a good

hour or maybe more. Feeling a little refreshed from our afternoon nap we decided to take a short cut through Ta Prohm to cut off a corner. This was certainly a lot more interesting. Angkor



Wat had been abandoned in 1432 and as the jungle reclaimed it, it had been all but forgotten until it was "re-discovered" again, overgrown and covered with foliage, by a French naturalist at the end of the 19th century. Most of the other ruins have been partially restored, but Ta Prohm has been left just as it was found. It was just as well we had tried to take the short cut, if we had just walked past it on the road the full wonder of the place wouldn't have been realised. Through the windows and

gateways wind the massive roots and branches of giant trees. The forest has grown through the buildings, and vines plunge down the walls like curtains. The paths are very uneven from the roots growing under them and it was hard going, but it was fascinating to see.

When we came out onto the main road again we were fortunate to find a taxi coming along. We tried to haggle with the driver about the fare, but he wouldn't budge and we had to pay the high price he originally asked. There were very few empty taxis around and in that heat he certainly knew it was a seller's market.

The taxi dropped us at the back entrance of the Angkor Wat temple. The temple is surrounded by a

water filled moat and we crossed the causeway into the back door and walked through to the other side. The ruins there were really good, decorated with elaborate stone carvings that were still visible. The front of the Angkor Wat had a beautiful bas-relief frieze, which is almost half a mile long. It was really worth photographing, except that the sun was shining full on it at that time and I felt that the detail would be lost. We decided to come back near to the sunset when the shadows would be longer and the bas-relief would stand out more. Being the main attraction of Angkor Wat, there were food and souvenir stalls outside, so we were finally able to have something to eat. We then went into the Auberge Royal to enjoy a drink in the air-conditioned bar where Meas-Sarithy works. As soon as we came through the door he saw us and showed us to a table where we all just sank into the comfortable armchairs, while he gave us each an icy cold towel to cool ourselves down.

Just before the sun set, we left the Auberge Royal to go back to take the photograph of the frieze. We then walked back to the house and by the time we got there Meas-Sarithy was already there waiting for us. He had prepared a delicious meal of fish, meat and rice and once we had all showered and changed we sat down to enjoy it and to talk about our day. I was so exhausted that before long I had to excuse myself and go to bed early, but the other chatted until quite late on.



Monday 20th January 1969

Although we still had one day left on our visas, we decided that we had seen enough of Angkor Wat and nothing would be achieved by going to see even more of the temples. After breakfast we packed our bags and said goodbye to Meas-Sarithy. He had arranged for two cyclopussees to take us into Siem Reap bus station. As we were paying the cyclopus drivers at the end of the journey we heard a familiar voice calling out to us. It was the American who had the hotel room next door to us in Vientianne. He was standing on the balcony of his hotel, which looked out over the bus station. As we were talking to him an American woman came out of the room and joined him on the balcony. She was his wife who we had not met in Vientianne. He introduced us to her as "the cabaret act from Laos".

At the bus station a taxi driver who offered to take us to the border for the same price as the bus fare approached us. We checked up and found that the bus fare was 80 riels each. The taxi was 240 riels and so we decided to take him up on his offer, mainly because he offered to take us right to the border, while if we caught the bus we would have to walk the last part. We put all our bags on the roof of the Peugeot estate car (all Cambodian taxis seem to be Peugeot estates) then got in ready to go, but the driver demanded payment before we moved off. Suspecting a con trick we didn't want to pay in advance, so the driver called over a policeman. The policeman didn't speak any English and we couldn't understand his French, so he went over to the tourist office and came back with one of the men who worked behind the counter there. He explained that in the past a number of backpackers had gone across the border without paying for the taxi, so now they all demand payment up front. It wasn't a con trick because the driver was a licensed taxi and if he did trick us he would certainly lose his valuable licence. So we were persuaded to pay him in advance and the smiling policeman and the tourist officer waved us off. The American and his wife watched the whole episode from their balcony with great enjoyment and as the taxi moved off we could hear him calling out "You Aussie guys causing trouble again?" He must have thought we were Australian.

If we thought we were going to travel in comfort, we had another think coming. The taxi stopped at a taxi rank just around the corner where he piled in another seven paying passengers. No wonder he could compete with the bus on fares. Including the driver there were now eleven of us in a car designed to carry seven passengers, plus a roof piled high with luggage. The first stop on the journey was a town called Sisophon, 106 kilometres away. As the taxi came into Sisophon the driver stopped and spoke to

somebody at the side of the road. The next thing, this person got in and sat between the driver and his door, which was how we arrived at the taxi station at Sisophon. From there the driver transferred us to another taxi for the 30 odd kilometre driver over unsealed roads to the border. When we arrived at the police checkpoint the driver started to unload our luggage, but we insisted that he waited for us to clear the immigration formalities, which was just as well because from the checkpoint to the border was another couple of kilometres. At the border proper we had to take our passports into a building to be checked. We then got back into the taxi for a short drive of a hundred yards to a turning circle where he dropped us off at the start of what looked like a short path over a footbridge. At the end of the bridge was a wooden gate that looked just like a garden gate, with a name on it saying "Thailand". We opened the gate and let ourselves in.

Footnote 1. About Cambodia in the 1970's:

While writing up the diary of events for Cambodia I couldn't help but feel a sense of tragic loss following the events following the coup by Pol Pot's Khmer Rouge and the genocide that followed. It was their policy to turn Cambodia back to year zero, to condemn all foreign influence and to isolate themselves from the outside world.

In re-writing this diary I have up to now enjoyed the memories that have been revived. Although I still have happy memories of my travels in Cambodia, they are tinged with sadness at the thoughts of the events of the mid 1970's and of the probable fate of the many people we met and talked with as well as those who offered us hospitality during our brief visit. I even found myself waking up at night thinking about it, something that hasn't happened when writing about the other countries. It is more than likely that many if not all of the people we dealt with who spoke to us in English or French would have been considered intellectuals and would have fallen victim to that regime's wholesale killings.

I would like to think that some of them escaped.

Footnote 2. About Stung Treng:

I would see Stung Treng again a little over two years later in March 1971, but this time from the comfort of the passenger cabin on board a BOAC jet, flying at 35,000 feet on a scheduled service between Bangkok and Hong Kong. It was a clear and cloudless day with almost unlimited visibility. Stung Treng was easy to spot, not just because of the distinctive landmark of the junction of two great rivers, but also because by that time the Indochina war had spread into Cambodia and on that day Stung Treng was well and truly ablaze. A large column of smoke rose from the burning town and ascended high into the stratosphere, As the plane flew past I looked upwards in shock and disbelief that a column of smoke could rise so high without dispersing. Feeling upset at seeing a place I had recently visited being razed to the ground, I pointed it out to the Scottish lady who was sitting next to me. She leaned across and looked out of the window, said "oh dear!" then carried on reading her book. ([back](#))

Thailand

From Aranyaprathet to Hadyai

Thailand currency

£1 = 48 baht.

1 baht divided into 100 stang.

(US\$1 = 20 baht).



Monday 20th January 1969.

As the gate from Cambodia automatically sprung shut behind us Louis said "well that saved them having to put up a 'please close the gate' sign". I asked if the gate was there to keep the Cambodians in or to stop the Thais from leaving. There were two people standing just inside Thailand who had watched us come through the border, one of them was an American Peace Corps worker and he welcomed us to Thailand. Mike thanked him on our behalf and advised him that the weather seemed much nicer on this side of the border. They then walked with us chatting until we came to a small building at the side of the road, which served as the immigration office.

Considering that Thailand and Cambodia didn't have diplomatic relations, I found it quite surprising that the frontier was such a relaxed place. There was a small village, which was where the Peace Corps guy was working, and the border seemed to form part of the village. There was no guard at the border and if we hadn't been shown where the immigration office was, we could have well walked right past it and I don't think anybody would have stopped us.

After all formalities had been completed we went to a café and had a drink of Ovaltine and some cakes. Mike was now anxious to get a move on to Bangkok as quickly as possible. He was getting to the end of his summer holidays and had to get back to Singapore to fly home in a few days time. With that in mind we caught a taxi to Aranyaprathet, only a few kilometres down the road, where he was informed he could catch an overnight bus to Bangkok.

When we got to Aranyaprathet we found that he had missed the evening bus and the next one was not until 5.30am. So we decided to have something to eat then find somewhere to stay for the night. We sat in an open-air restaurant and had an enjoyable meal while just watching life go by. The bill came to just 2 baht each. A man got talking to us and introduced himself as Sin. He asked us lots of questions about where we had been and where we were going. He then told us that there were some trucks going to Bangkok at 10 o'clock, and that they usually take passengers. He then took us to another café where he said the trucks would leave from and in the meantime he lent us a bicycle so we could ride around and look at the town. I rode around for a while, but Aranyaprathet was only a small place and there was nothing much to see. The roads were unmade and full of potholes, which made cycling uncomfortable. I also felt uncomfortable about riding around at night without any lights on the bicycle, so I returned to the café and sat down to write some letters and have a drink while we waited for the trucks.

Just before 10 o'clock we went out to see where the trucks were, but there was no sign of them. Sin came back to collect his bike and finding us still there he offered to let us sleep in his house that night. We walked home with him to his one room house and we all bedded down together on the floor. Sin drove us mad that night. We just wanted to go to sleep, but he insisted on reading to us. When he had finished he tried to get into bed with Louis. When Louis shooed him away, he then tried to get into bed with Mike. He drove Mike mad asking him if he had any Australian coins for his collection and was thrilled when he gave him a 10-cent piece. I had troubles too, there was a mosquito inside my net and although I could hear it, I couldn't find it. Eventually I managed to kill it and settled down to sleep. Sin spent the night sleeping right up against one side of Louis' net, while Louis spent the night sleeping against the side of the net furthest away from him.

We were woken up again at about 3 o'clock by some new arrivals, but things quickly went quiet again. The next disturbance was at 5 o'clock when Mike left to catch the early bus to Bangkok. He was hoping to get there in time to catch the morning train to Had Yai, which is right in the south of Thailand near the Malaysian border, where there is a connecting train to Singapore. We said our farewells then went back to sleep again until 8 o'clock when Sin woke up. Once we were awake we decided to get up and get out as quickly as possible. We thanked Sin for the floor space and gave him some Yugoslavian coins that I had left over, for his coin collection.

We walked well out of town before stopping at a café to get some breakfast, just in case Sin came out and found us. We started hitching just after 9 o'clock, but while we were standing there a road works team came along and set about digging a hole in the road right by where we were standing, forcing us to walk further up the road. While we were walking a jeep stopped and took us 22 km to the next town. From there we soon got a long lift in the back of a truck that took us almost half way to Bangkok. The road was unmade for most of the way and we got covered in dust. The good part of that lift was that the driver had a large flask of iced water in the cab and he frequently stopped to give us a drink. The lift finished at an ice factory and we went over the road to start hitching again, but the driver came over to us and took us to a café to buy us a drink. He then took us to a garage where the owner permitted us to wash and clean up a bit from the dusty ride. I don't know who this guy was, but he seemed to have a lot of influence around the place. The next thing was he had stopped a bus and after a short conversation with the driver, he let us travel to Bangkok for free. It was just as well that we were in the bus, because during the afternoon it poured with rain. Had we not been in the bus we would no doubt have been soaked through.

By the time the bus arrived in Bangkok the rain had stopped again. From the bus station we caught the number 29 to Hualumpong, then walked to the Thai Song Greet (TSG) where we checked in again. Needless to say, the first thing we did was to have a shower.

We had been away from the TSG for just two weeks and a lot of the faces had changed. Most of the people who were there a few weeks before had moved on, notably the Australians on their summer holidays had mostly returned home again, leaving the place to the more seasoned travellers like ourselves. We had arranged with Mike that if he missed the train he would stay that night in the TSG, but as he wasn't there, he must have made it onto the train in time.

One of the first people I met was Matt. He was about to start work teaching English. He hadn't heard from Martin since he left about the same time as we went off to Vientiane. I managed to sell our remaining Laos money at face value to somebody who was about to go there. When Louis came down we had some supper and took part in the best feature of the TSG, that is just sitting around chatting to all and sundry. That night we also met the Germans who crossed the Pakistan-Indian border at the same time as us. I also met a Swiss guy called Salvador* for the first time. It was good to be back on the main overland route again.

Our first day back in Bangkok was a busy one. After collecting our mail from the American Express office we went to the Portuguese Embassy to enquire about visas for Timor. Although Indonesia had only recently opened up for travel to Australia, it had in fact been issuing tourist visas in Australia a few months earlier and a route through was already becoming established. The route ended up in Timor where it was possible to fly to Darwin in Australia. The eastern part of the island belonged to Portugal and we had heard that we needed a visa. At the Portuguese Embassy we were told that permission for the visa had to be referred to both Lisbon and Timor and would take 4 to 5 weeks to issue. We could apply for the visa in Bangkok and collect it in Jakarta if we wanted, so we filled in the forms and hoped that the visas would be through in time for us when we reached Jakarta.

We then searched all over the place to find a tube so we could roll up the rubbings we had bought in Angkor Wat and post them home. We looked everywhere and eventually managed to find one in a carpet shop that must have been the centre of a roll of carpet. The tube was a few metres long, but the shop owner hacksawed a short length off for us. Even so, the wall of the tube was very thick and it was quite heavy. Back in the TSG we started to unpeel the thick paper that the tube was made of to make it a bit lighter. Even though we pulled lots of the paper off, the tube was still very strong, but by now half of its original weight.

We then went to the Australian Embassy to enquire about entry permits. Having been told in Calcutta that we needed to get a permit we were quite concerned in case we couldn't get in at the end of our journey. On the way there I stopped at a shoe shop and bought a new pair of sandals. At the Australian Embassy we were told that being British citizens we didn't need any permits or visas to enter and work in Australia, which was a weight off our minds. We then went down to the information office where we were given a stack of leaflets and a book about Australia. We spent a few hours reading Australian newspapers and replenished the everlasting toilet roll again before heading back to the TSG.

On the way back to the hotel the strap came away on my new sandals, so I diverted back to the shoe shop while Louis went back on his own. At the shoe shop the assistant looked at the sandals and took them into the back. When he returned he had repaired them for me. I wasn't happy but as he didn't speak any English and I couldn't make myself understood, I decided to give them a try. But the repair didn't last more than 50 yards when the strap came apart again. I took them back to the shop again, but the assistant just shrugged. A customer who spoke English explained that they shop were not prepared to do anything about it, but I refused to leave until they did, so the manager called the police. The policeman who arrived didn't speak any English either and after a short time he left again without taking any action. The manager took me around the corner to a shop where somebody spoke English and they explained that in Thai law, the shopkeeper was not required to offer any form of guarantee. If the shoes fell apart it was just hard luck. Despite this explanation, I then went back to the shop to try to insist on a refund. I did a lot of shouting and kicked out at a shelf full of shoes. My good sandal then flew off my foot and sailed over the display knocking a box of shoes down from a top shelf. We then watched horrified as a domino effect started. The falling box knocked something else, which in turn knocked something else. Within seconds the whole display had collapsed in a heap and there were shoes everywhere. A lot of the boxes had opened spilling out their contents, so all the pairs were mixed up. At that point I decided it would be prudent to leave, fast. I dropped the broken sandal and ran out of the shop barefoot. A woman ran out of the office and stood in my way but I was able to push past her and she followed me into the street screaming hysterically after me as I ran away. I didn't stop running until I reached the TSG and for the next hour I watched the door anxiously in case I had been identified and

the police came to get me.

That evening I managed to sell four letterheads to a group who were on their way home to England. We haggled about the price for ages and eventually agreed on a total of 60 baht for the four letterheads. There was also another group of English guys there who had travelled out in a Land Rover. They had crossed from Madras to Penang on the weekly car ferry, then driven up to Bangkok. They were visiting a friend on a British Ship that was berthed in Bangkok the next day and invited Louis and I to join them.

When they came to pick us up the next day, they were in a German registered (Z plates) Volkswagen Combi van. The VW belonged to a couple who had crossed with them on the ferry from India and they were also coming along to visit the ship. The VW was converted into a camper and belonged to an American called Doug Beckman. He was travelling with his Dutch girl friend Yvonne. We all piled into the back of the VW and drove off to the docks where we were allowed to drive right up to the ship and park at the bottom of the gangplank.

The ship belonged to the Blue Funnel Line. I didn't make a note of its name, but it was something like Methusen or Menethuan, but I do remember that it was registered in Liverpool. On board we were introduced to the Land Rover crew's friend, who was the chief cook. He took us down to his cabin, but it was very cramped with all of us in there so after a few minutes we all moved to the seaman's mess where we were each given an ice cold can of Harp lager. The ship being from Liverpool was naturally full of Scousers and we soon got into a good-natured banter about whether Everton or Liverpool was the best football team. The mess was well decorated and hanging on the wall was all the ties that had been cut off all the newcomers when they crossed the equator. They had a cargo of cars and latex rubber and had come via Cape Town and Singapore. One of the Land Rover crew was wearing flowery shorts that the seamen asked for to decorate the back of the door but they didn't get them.

We spent a few hours on the ship and when we left we decided to visit the Bangkok snake farm. When we arrived there we stopped behind a car that was going in and when the barrier lifted for them, we followed through right behind him. The snake farm has a large collection of live venomous snakes from all over Thailand. They regularly collect the snake's venom in order to make anti venom serums and we were able to watch one of the keepers picking the snakes up and "milking" them. There was a cage full of cobras but they were all sleeping in the sun and

didn't look at all menacing. When nobody was looking we threw a small stone at one to try to annoy it so it would flatten out and we could get a photo, but it just wouldn't co-operate.

When we drove back to the gate to leave again, they wouldn't open it for us. Apparently we had to pay five baht each to come in and they now wanted paying. Anticipating this problem we had drawn all the curtains in the back of the VW and we all lay on the floor so the back of



the van would look empty. When Doug and Yvonne tried to pay for just the two of them they didn't believe them and tried to look in through the curtains. Eventually we got away with paying for just four of us.

We all went back to the TSG for a late lunch and spent the rest of the afternoon chatting. Don Greer who I had first met in Goa had flow in that morning and he joined us. The Land Rover crew were starting their drive back down to Singapore the next day and they offered to give us a lift out of Bangkok as far as Ratchaburi, 105 kilometres away and the start of the road South.

We had arranged to meet in the TSG to be ready to leave by 11.30 and right on time we were sitting

downstairs packed and ready to leave. The Land Rover arrived a few minutes later and the four guys got out and came in to have a meal before leaving. They said that they wouldn't be leaving for another hour, so we decided to use the time to walk to the post office to send the parcel of Angkor rubbings home.

Trying to post a parcel to England was not the straightforward job we had expected it to be. First of all we had to fill out four different customs declarations and get them stamped by a customs officer who had a desk at one end of the post office. We then had to take the parcel and the completed forms to another counter to be posted, but they wouldn't accept it as it was because it was not sealed properly. Apparently we needed to have it tied with string and apply sealing wax to the knots. We had to go outside to a stationery shop and buy some sealing wax and string. Neither of us had used sealing wax before so the stationer had to show us how to seal the parcel for posting. We used the cigarette lighter to melt the wax onto the knots and the edges of the wrapping paper and were also supposed to use a seal to press into the hot wax, but neither of us had a signet ring so we used the end of my penknife. Back at the post office we were finally able to post the parcel, which cost 46.80 baht, almost £1 to send by surface mail.

All this had taken a lot longer than we had expected and although the post office was only a short way from the TSG, we caught a bus for the short distance in order to get back quickly. We ran the last few yards from the bus stop, but we could already see that the Land Rover was no longer parked outside. It was just after 1 o'clock and they had given up waiting for us. Because we were already packed we considered the idea of setting out there and then, but decided instead to stay another night and get an early start the next day.

We got talking to a Turkish guy who said he was a professional wrestler and he was working his way around the world fighting in different countries to pay his way. He said he collected banknotes and asked us if we would sell him an English pound note, but he would only pay about half of the going exchange rate for it. A group of us went up to his room and he showed us his collection. He had an album full of different banknotes in many different currencies. It must have been worth a fortune.

Downstairs again we got talking with Doug and Yvonne. They were heading back down south again on Sunday and had already agreed with Don to give him a lift if he shared the cost of the petrol. They offered to let us come with them to Singapore if we too put in a share. We had intended to hitch hike down south, but we figured that it wouldn't cost too much with the fuel split 5 ways, so we asked them if they wouldn't mind us just travelling with them just as far as Penang, 1501 kilometres to the South in Malaysia. They agreed to this so we arranged to leave first thing on Sunday morning.

Later that day we met an English guy called John. He was also looking for a way to get down to Singapore and we suggested that he asked Doug and Yvonne if he could join the party. After all the more we could squeeze into the VW, the cheaper it was going to be, and there was plenty of room because the beds converted to seating during the day. When Doug popped in later on we introduced him to John and he agreed to let him come along. That evening the whole group of us got together for a meal at the TSG. Each of us ordered something different and we all shared each other's meals. It was a terrific banquet and the total bill was came to just 24 baht, that is 4 baht each for a wonderful banquet.

The next day we decided to take it easy. We didn't want to do any more sightseeing so we got up late and went downstairs for brunch. We heard his voice before we got to the bottom of the stairs and we both looked at each other and said together "Laffy". We both thought we had seen the last of him in Goa, but sure enough, Lafayette Bosman was sitting there as large as life in the TSG. This guy seems to turn up like a bad penny. From Goa he had travelled down to the South of India and had flown from Trivandrum to Jafna in Ceylon. After touring around Ceylon he then flew to Bangkok, having arrived from Colombo that morning. He was staying at another hotel but had come to the TSG for lunch and to meet other travellers. We chatted for an hour or two before he went back to his hotel. We had no way of knowing it at the time, but this was the last time our paths would cross again.

Sunday 26th January 1969

We got up early to have showers and pack in time for our lift at 8 o'clock. When we got downstairs Don, Doug and Yvonne were sitting having their breakfast. John came down a few minutes later and we all joined them for our last meal in the TSG. We had been here so long; a total of thirteen nights over the two visits that the place was beginning to feel like it was our home.

We eventually drove away at 8.45 and Doug immediately got lost trying to get out of Bangkok. I took over the navigation and before long we were back on track again. So there would be no arguments about how much fuel was in the tank when we started, Doug stopped at the first petrol station we came to and filled the tank to the top, which he paid for himself. Being a Shell petrol station we were at last able to get our free map of Thailand, the old one was now in a



number of pieces and we retired it to the dustbin before driving off again. We all agreed to split the cost of all the petrol we put in from now on and to leave Doug with a full tank when we would eventually part company in Penang. So there wouldn't be any arguments as to who had the best seat in the van, it was agreed that we would rotate seats each time we stopped.

Just before we reached Cha-Am, about 160 kilometres south of Bangkok, we drove past

a large sign at the side of the road pointing to the "Thai-Israel Project". Doug stopped the van and reversed back up to the entrance saying that as they were Jewish, they would like to have a look and see what exactly this project was. Louis and I also being Jewish agreed with him and we were all quite surprised when Don chipped in that he was also one of the clan. We all looked at John in anticipation, but he had to admit that he was the odd one out. Anyway, even if he had been an Arab, he would have been out voted. Doug drove into the project and parked outside what appeared to be the main building. An Israeli woman came out to greet us and introduced herself as Ati Gofer. She was wondering what a German registered Volkswagen van was doing there and when we explained who we were and why we had come she invited us in and gave us all a cold drink. Soon after her husband Dovid came in. He had seen the strange vehicle and came to see who the visitors were.

The Thai-Israel Project is an Israeli foreign aid project. Israeli agricultural experts had set up the project to pass on their expertise to Thai students and farmers. The project was run on similar lines to a kibbutz and having spent some time on Kibbutz Hulata a little more than a year ago, I was amazed at the thought of a kibbutz in Thailand. Dovid drove us around the project in his jeep and introduced us to many of the Thai staff and the students, but as there wasn't enough room for all of us in the jeep, Doug and Yvonne had to follow behind in the VW.

After the guided tour Dovid invited us to join them for lunch back in the house. Ati had prepared a fabulous meal and the dishes included humous, olives, pita bread and many other things that were typically Israeli. When I was in Israel I didn't particularly like the food, mainly because on the kibbutz we seemed to have the same things every day and it became monotonous. Having the same sort of food here in Thailand it was a novelty and I thoroughly enjoyed eating it. We spent almost the whole afternoon sitting and talking to them. They didn't get many Western visitors and we would have probably been welcome to stay overnight, but we had to get on our way. At 4.30 we said "I'hitraot" (Hebrew for goodbye) and continued the drive south. That night we reached Pratchuab, a small coastal town on the Gulf of Siam.

Doug and Yvonne were going to sleep in the camper van and Don was determined to find a hotel for the night. Louis, myself and John decided that we were going to sleep on the beach, but on inspection we found that the tide mark was very high up, almost to the top of the beach, which wouldn't leave us an awful lot of room to sleep. Not being experts in the way of the tides or having access to tidal tables we

decided not to chance sleeping on the beach in case there was a particularly high tide that night. Instead we arranged with Don that if we paid a share of his hotel costs we could sleep on the floor in his room. The hotel he had found charged 20 baht for the room. Don paid 10 baht and we split the other 10 baht three ways for the use of the floor.

We went out for a meal and met an American Peace Corps guy and some Germans. The Peace Corps guy was an expert on malaria and spent the evening explaining to us how the mosquitoes spread the disease and how they were trying to combat it. Being in the middle of a malaria area we were all concerned about the disease and we were all fascinated by what he had to say, so much so that we stayed up discussing it until after midnight.

Back in the room Don had a good moan when Louis and I put our mosquito nets up. There were strings going everywhere and he had to duck under them to get to his bed. He said he would probably end up dreaming about tents and telegraph wires because that was what the place looked like. I don't remember what started it, but before long we were all laughing, making wisecracks about the nets, strings, mosquitoes etc.

Before we set out the next morning we all decided to go for a swim at the local beach and we were having a great time until we noticed that there was effluent floating on the surface of the

water. After that we all went back to the hotel for a shower before setting off again. Apart from a short stop for a late lunch, we drove all day. The lunch stop was in a small town called Kraburi which was right on the border with Burma just across the river. We watched a ferry crossing backwards and forwards carrying passengers and there didn't seem to be any immigration control. It was as if Kraburi and the Burmese town across the river were just one town with a river running through. We all felt tempted to take the ferry over and back



again but decided against it because none of us had visas for Burma or re-entry visas for Thailand and the consequences should an immigration officer suddenly appear didn't bear thinking about.

There was very little traffic on the road, but when Doug stopped on a bridge to take a photo of the van going across, traffic appeared from everywhere and we caused a traffic jam. Later on we crossed another bridge where there was a waterfall. Doug asked me to drive the van over while he took a photograph of it on the bridge with the waterfall behind.

It was after 8 o'clock before we stopped in Takuapa for a meal. We sat in the middle of the town in an outdoor restaurant and enjoyed a good meal. After we had eaten and were sitting around talking we saw a rat the size of a small dog walk across the road and go to the rubbish bins at the side of the restaurant. As we watched it we noticed that there were quite a few more of them, some even bigger, crawling around amongst the bins. We decided to forgo our dessert and move on to try to find somewhere to spend the night. First of all we tried to find a Wat, but after driving around for a while looking for it we found ourselves back in the centre of town at the restaurant again. We eventually found a hotel room for 25 baht and as with last night, Don took the bed and we all slept on the floor, but this time we were all very tired after such a long day and we all went straight to sleep.

We started out very early in the morning and drove more or less non-stop until lunchtime. By now we were starting to run out of Thai money and lunch had to consist of bananas. We bought a number of bunches at a baht for 12 bananas. Doug still had some Malaysian money from when he had driven up and we tried to see if anybody would accept it, but all they wanted was baht. We went to a bank to try to change US dollars but they told us that they couldn't exchange that currency. I tried to change some

pounds and they weren't acceptable either. Between us we tried Malaysian, French, German, Swedish and Canadian currencies, but with each one, after examining the currency notes the clerk told us it wasn't one of the currencies they exchanged. When Don asked if they exchanged Martian currency and the clerk asked if he could see it, we decided to give up and find another bank.

By the time we got to the next town the van was almost out of petrol and if the bank there hadn't been able to exchange money we would have been in big shtuk. Fortunately the clerk in that bank was a bit more clued up with foreign exchange and we were able to exchange US dollars without any problems. After that we drove all day until we reached Songla.

Just outside Songla there was a newly built tourist hotel and we stopped there to go to the toilet and to replenish our toilet roll. Out of curiosity we asked the price, but at 100 baht for a room we all decided to try somewhere else. Down the road was another hotel and they showed us a room for 60 baht. The room was massive, probably big enough for us all to fit in and park the van too, so we asked them if they had a smaller cheaper room. They gave us the key for a smaller room for just 15 baht, but when we saw it, it was not much bigger than a cupboard. Back at reception we asked about the other room again, but they claimed it had gone while we were looking at the smaller room. Doug had been parked outside and he said that nobody else had come in while we were there so we reckoned that they just didn't want us to stay there and drove into town.

Songla was a small fishing town and there were very few places to stay. We found a hotel for 20 baht but the room was only small, it was very cramped but we managed to all fit in but it was cosy. Don was not too happy with Louis and I having our mosquito nets tied up because the strings ran over his bed and he would get tangled up in them if he decided to sit up during the night. In fact, when he woke up the next morning, the first thing he did was untie my net strings allowing the net to settle around me and they are very difficult to untangle yourself from when that happens.

We put everything in the van before going down to the beach for a swim, where we also had breakfast at a beachside café. It was almost 10 o'clock before we set out for the short drive to Malaysia and we arrived at the frontier at 11.30. We all managed to clear Thai immigration within half an hour, but as we drove over to the customs, the customs officer was coming out of his building and locking the door. He told us that they close for an hour at mid-day and we would have to wait. We didn't really need to go to customs on exit, but Doug needed the customs to clear his vehicle papers out of Thailand, so we had no option but to wait an hour.

While we waited we had some lunch and used up the last of my Thai money. We also took the opportunity to do a bit of sunbathing. Eventually the customs opened and Doug got all his papers stamped, but they asked him to pay for the service. He refused to pay and they had quite a heated row about it. Eventually they let him go without paying and we all piled into the van and drove off before they changed their minds. While sunbathing, Louis had stripped right down to his bathing costume and that was all he was wearing as we left Thailand and drove into Malaysia.

Some more statistics.

Since leaving Liverpool 119 days ago we have travelled 15,775 miles and hitched 146 lifts. I have spent £46:2:10 (£46.14) on living expenses and £45:7:10 (£45.39) on other items such as one off expenses, visas, and fares. (This does not include the cost of the lift to Penang, which has not been paid yet.) Up to now, Bangkok has been the most expensive place we stayed in, having exceeded our 10/- per day budget on all but one of the days. Our average daily spend in Bangkok was 13/5 (67p)

Note from * above

* The next time I would meet Salvador (that was his nickname, his real name was Heinz Hunziker) would be when I was working in Darwin where we became good friends. A few weeks after we met in Bangkok, he ran into trouble in Thailand when he overstayed his visa. He was travelling with an Irishman called Dave O'Conner who's visa had also expired and they were both arrested and put into jail

in Had Yai. They had to pay their substantial fine (about 2000 baht each) in cash and in baht but they only had traveller's cheques in dollars and the court would not accept them. They remained in jail until the Swiss Consul eventually came down to Had Yai to see Salvador and exchanged the traveller's cheques for both of them. ([Back](#))

Malaysia

Malaysian Currency:

*£1 = 7.20 Malaysian Dollars (Ringit).
(US\$1 = M\$3).*

Malaysian, Singapore and Brunei dollars were pegged at the same exchange rate. Coins and banknotes in any of these currencies were almost identical in appearance and all three currencies were accepted everywhere in the three countries.



Wednesday 29th January 1969.



We all trooped into the Malaysian immigration office. Louis was the last one through the door, but as he entered the room all the immigration officers looked over at him in disbelief. He was still wearing only his swimming costume and it was obvious by the looks he was getting that this had not gone down too well. It was obvious that the immigration officers were just itching to get at Louis because they dealt with the rest of us in record time, stamping our passports to allow

us to stay for two weeks, we were now free to go. But when it came to Louis' turn the chief himself came out of his office to deal with him personally.

He examined Louis' passport very carefully and was probably disappointed to find that it was genuine. Next he was quizzed for a good five minutes as to where he had come from and where he was going and why. His occupation shown on his passport as a Chartered Accountant, which was true, but at first they refused to believe that he was. They eventually agreed that it didn't really matter too much what he did for a living and decided to let that one go, but they still didn't believe him. They then asked him how much money he had with him and when he told them how much he had they didn't believe that either, so they asked him to produce it. His traveller's cheques were in his luggage, so they led him back to the van to get it out. He found the world-wide cheques without any problem, but by now these were down to less than £50 so he needed to produce his Sterling Area cheques to satisfy them. Having not used them since Bombay they were lurking somewhere near the

bottom of his bag and everything else had to come out as he searched for them. Eventually he found them and the immigration officer carefully totalled them up to check that he did have the money he claimed he had. Louis being the chartered accountant that he was, the amount was exactly as he had declared.

The immigration officer was obviously disappointed for not having found any valid reason for refusing him entry (the bathing costume was obviously not enough on its own), so he reluctantly stamped his passport after having spent almost a quarter of an hour dealing with him. When I looked at the stamp they had allowed him to stay for four weeks, so I complained that I also wanted 4 weeks and after a bit of a fuss, they extended my stay to match Louis'.

By now it was after 3 o'clock. Because of the accumulated delays, it had taken us three and a half hours since we first arrived at the Thailand side of the border to get through the frontier formalities. Even though Louis' brush with the immigration had only taken about fifteen minutes, as far as Doug was concerned it was just the last straw. We were all hoping to get to Penang before nightfall and we still had the best part of 200 kilometres to go and Doug was now getting angry, mainly with Louis. During the first part of the drive through Malaysia nobody spoke at all. The Malaysian roads were good and Doug was able to put his foot down to catch up on some lost time.

Just before we reached Alor Setar there was a sudden loud bang that came from underneath the van. Not only did we hear it, but we all felt it too. Doug immediately brought the van to a stop and we all piled out. Doug and I both crawled underneath to inspect the damage, expecting to find all sorts of expensive things wrong, but everything looked normal. Nothing was broken, dented or bent and nothing was leaking. We crawled all over the vehicle to check it out but it all appeared normal. I suggested that we had run over a large rock, but Doug was adamant that he had see nothing in the road and when we walked back along the road to check, there wasn't anything around that could have caused such a bang. We eventually continued the journey none the wiser as to the cause of the noise, but Doug did take it easy after that.

We eventually reached Butterworth just as it was getting dark and went straight to the port to catch the ferry to Penang. We joined a long queue of cars and Doug got out to find out when the next ferry was leaving. While Doug was away, Louis got out to have a look around and no sooner had he disappeared than the queue started to move. Doug was standing at the front of the queue and signalled to us to drive forward, so I jumped in the driver's seat and drove the van as the queue moved along. Louis had still not returned by the time we reached the front of the queue and when Doug found that he was missing he went mad. He was all for getting the

ferry without him but we all voted to wait a bit longer. By the time Louis turned up again it was too late to drive onto the ferry and we had to wait for the next one. The ferry to Butterworth is Penang's only road transport link with the mainland and they run regularly around the clock so fortunately we didn't have to wait too long for the next one.

When we drove onto the ferry we were placed right up against a wall on one side of the van, and on the other side the cars were so close

that we couldn't open any doors. It was only a ten minute journey so we didn't mind sitting in the van, but Louis decided that he wanted to have a look around. He opened the door and with some difficulty he managed to squeeze out. When we docked in Georgetown, the capital of Penang, we had hoped that Louis would be waiting for us at the gangplank, but it was not to be. We couldn't wait on the ferry and we had to drive up the ramp before we were allowed to stop. Louis eventually got off the ferry and we



all thought Doug was going to burst a blood vessel with fury as he watched him strolling up the ramp as though he had all the time in the world. Yvonne had to calm him down again before he drove off into Georgetown to find the Youth Hostel. One thing we had noticed was that nobody had asked us to pay for the ferry. When I asked Doug about that he said that the ferry going in to Penang was free and we only had to pay when we wanted to leave the Island again.

The Youth Hostel was easy to find as it was situated in the grounds of the E & O hotel. This was one of the best hotels in Georgetown and we were beginning to think it would be a wonderful hostel, but the building that housed the YH was an old wooden building over to one end of the grounds. It had its own entrance onto the street and it consisted of two large dormitories, one for men and one for women. We all checked into the hostel except Doug and Yvonne, who parked their van in the grounds outside and came inside to use the shower and toilet facilities. The warden was never around except to collect his money and he thought it was our van and never really noticed that somebody was sleeping in it.

After a quick shower and a change of clothes we all went out for dinner to celebrate our arrival in Penang. We all felt that we had achieved something having travelled down from Bangkok together and to all intents and purposes this could well have been a farewell dinner. None of us had very much Malaysian money, so before we went to eat, Don, Doug and I went out to find somewhere to change money, but wherever we went the rate was really lousy, so I ended up changing just ten shillings, for which I received only M\$3.25. This was sufficient because the meal we had cost just 50 cents each.

For dessert I bought a slice of pineapple from a hawker's cart for just 10 cents. A slice is a quarter of a pineapple cut lengthways. The hawker cuts off all the skin then removes all the pits by cutting grooves around the pineapple, leaving it with an interesting pattern. At home the only pineapple I had eaten was tinned pineapple and I had never been too keen on it, but I was persuaded to try this pineapple by Yvonne who assured me that it was not at all like the pineapple we got in Europe. The hawker told me that this was Sarawak pineapple and it was the best pineapple in the world. I was sceptical about his claim, but decided to try it anyway, and wow! He was right, this pineapple was absolutely delicious, so delicious in fact that I had another piece, then another. And then it got its own back on me as my mouth swelled up very painfully. Sarawak pineapple may be delicious, but it contains a greater amount of acid (could this be citric acid?) than most other pineapple and it is not good to eat too much at a time, as I had now found out. For the next half-hour I walked around with my tongue hanging out and my mouth open waiting for the effects to wear off again. After that experience I would in future limit myself to just one slice at a time, even if I that "time" was at least 10 times a day.

It was almost 1 am before we went to bed that night and Lou and I slept through until almost 10 o'clock then next morning. When we woke up we found that Don had gone out and the van was not in its parking place. We presumed that they had decided to go off without us, so we went back to bed and slept for another hour, but John got up and went out on his own. When we eventually got up and out, our first stop was to a bank to change money. At last we could use some of our Sterling Area traveller's cheques. There was no black market in Malaysia so we thought a bank would be the best place to change money and we went to the first one we found. We had noticed the night before that they all displayed their exchange rates and all of them were the same so we thought that it didn't matter which bank we used. We had already completed all the paperwork and it was only when we were handed the slip with the calculation to take to the cashier we noticed that there was a deduction of M\$2 per cheque. We went back to the exchange desk for an explanation and were told that this was the bank's commission charge. Both Louis and I handed the clerk his paperwork back, took back our traveller's cheques and left the bank quickly before he caused a fuss. We tried a few more banks and they all had swingeing commission charges, until we went into the First National and City Bank, who only charged 10 cents per transaction, regardless of how many cheques we cashed. We each changed a £10 traveller's cheque, and needless to say, this was going to be the bank we would use to change money in Malaysia from now on.

Next we went to the tourist office to get some information. Before she gave us any information, the lady behind the counter asked us to fill in the visitor's book. We noticed that we had only just missed John by

about 10 minutes, and Don, Doug and Yvonne (DD+Y) by less than half-an-hour.

From there we went to the post office to send some letters home and to check post restante, even though we didn't expect to receive anything there. Louis managed to get a complete set of stamps on a small packet he sent home, claiming that it was apparently quite valuable to have a complete set of stamps on one item. I also sent a letter home and managed to fill all the available space on the envelope with a lot of different low value stamps, even though it still wasn't a

complete set.

We then watched a pineapple seller preparing a pineapple, and after buying a slice each, he allowed me to cut one up while he gave me instructions on how to cut out the pits and make the nice pattern that is customary. If I didn't learn anything else from my travels, the one thing I am still able to do to this day is slice pineapples, and now whenever we have a pineapple at home, I am always the one that has to slice it up.



We then bought some Chinese New Year cards for 10 cents each at a most beautiful Chinese Temple. Nearby there was a sort of Chinese Punch & Judy type of puppet show, with sound



effects consisting of all sorts of percussion instruments, but mostly cymbals crashing loudly throughout the play. I didn't understand a thing, but it was none the less entertaining, and deafening.

For lunch I had a large bowl of beef noodle soup, which for 10 cents was extremely filling and very similar to the soup Chinese we had eaten so often in Cambodia, except that instead of chicken it was made with beef. and

in Malaysia it is called mee soup, (mee being the Malaysian word for noodles). 10 cents works out at just under 3½ d in sterling (1½ p).

In the evening we went back to the hostel and found a note on Louis' bed from DD+Y saying that they had come back at 12.30 to pick us up, but we were out. They would be back in the evening and would see us then. Very soon after that they arrived, having spent the afternoon driving around the Island. They had had a most enjoyable time and as they told us about where they had been we became more and more sorry that we had missed them. Because they hadn't left until lunchtime they felt that they had rushed the tour and had decided to do it again the next day and we were invited to join in for an early departure, to which we readily agreed. Apparently during the day Doug and Don had been discussing Louis and I and had decided to give us the nickname "The Bopsy Twins", named after an American comic strip that neither of us had ever seen. We didn't know whether to be complimented or offended.

John had bought things in the market and was going to try to cook his own evening meal in the hostel kitchen. The rest of us went out together to look for somewhere to eat our meal. I told everybody about the fantastic beef noodle soup that could be bought from hawkers and we all decided to try to find somewhere to get some. It was not too difficult to find because there are hawkers all over the place,

each one making a different dish. We found one selling beef noodle soup and had a bowl each, which we ate sitting at a table in a nearby restaurant. The hawkers and the nearby restaurants didn't seem to mind each other and often permitted the hawker's customers to sit at their tables to eat their food.

Before long we found ourselves in an area that seemed to be the fruit and vegetable market, with stalls everywhere selling all sorts of fruits and vegetable I had never seen before. The smell from all the fruit was beautiful until we came to an area where there were a number of stalls selling a spiky looking object the size of a football. This was my first introduction to the durian, which smells awful, like nothing I can describe. These durian fruits are extremely popular throughout Malaysia and Indonesia, although most westerners tend to dislike them and I can understand why. From a distance it smells as though there is a gas leak, and I must admit that during the day I had thought that there were a lot of gas leaks in Penang, that is until I found out the real cause of the smell. It is the only fruit I know that actually smells the same whether it is not yet ready to eat, or ripe or mouldy. Durians are quite heavy and have a hard shell that is covered with sharp spikes. They can be deadly if one falls from its tree while somebody is standing underneath. You can't pick one up with your bare hands and it is usual to see them being carried by means of a string wrapped around them in such a way as to form a cradle. The spikes stop the string from sliding off. A weapon and a repellent all rolled into one.

We found a funfair and paid 10 cents to go in. The rides were really quite tame so we didn't bother to go on any of them, but it was interesting to see. There was an outdoor film being shown and I think the language was Japanese with subtitles in Malaysian, but it was really ham acting. It was obviously some sort of weepy film and Yvonne started watching it and sat there enthralled, despite not understanding a word of the dialogue. She insisted on sitting through to the end, so the rest of us went and sat in a café and had a drink and a chat while we waited for Yvonne. Don had not yet been to the bank and was still short of money so I exchanged US\$10 for him, warned him about the bank charges and pointed him in the direction of the First National and City Bank.

Eventually the film finished. Yvonne had enjoyed a good cry and came over to join us in the cafe. Then we all walked back to the hostel, buying yet another slice of pineapple on the way. At the hostel Doug and Yvonne came in with us and we sat and chatted until after 1am before going to bed.

The next morning Doug came into the dormitory at 8 o'clock to wake us all up. By 9 we were all ready to leave and piled into the van for our day trip. The first stop was the bank so

everybody could change some money, but they didn't open until 10 so we all went to a place near the sea front to have some breakfast. After the bank we then drove down the coast to Batu Ferringhi where there was a beautiful unspoiled beach and we were the only ones on it. We all piled into the water for a swim and Doug found a coconut floating in the surf. We then made up a game where the British defended the shoreline and the Americans had to get the coconut onto the beach. Yvonne joined in on the American



side to make the teams even. It was quite exhausting and after ten minutes we stopped for half time.

There was a palm tree growing at a 45 degree angle across the beach and Doug decided to try to climb up to get some coconuts. He made it to the top but was unable to get at the coconuts



because they were covered with large ants that stung him when he tried to pull one of the nuts off. He came back down again and we continued the game, this time with the Americans defending the beach. The game got quite rough and at one point Don tried to catch the "ball" and missed. It hit him on the forehead and gave him a nasty cut. A few moments later Doug also missed and the ball hit him full in the mouth, knocking one of the caps off his front teeth. Nobody had really been keeping score, but the game was abandoned after that and declared a draw, even though the Brits were winning by one cut forehead and a tooth to nil.

The next stop on the tour was the Titi Krawan waterfall. At the bottom of the waterfall is a very deep pool where we could have a swim in fresh water to wash off the

sand and salt from the sand and salt from the beach. We stayed there for a few hours just swimming and sunbathing. There was nothing else there and nobody else came during that time. It was just idyllic.

Eventually hunger got the better of us and we drove down to the next small village to find somewhere to have some lunch. Doug wasn't able to eat too much because of his tooth, but the rest of us enjoyed a lovely meal.

The next stop was a snake temple. Inside the temple there were hundreds of snakes all over the place. We asked one of the monks if it was safe for us to handle some of them and he reached up, took one down and handed it to me to hold. It then wrapped itself around my arm and I was able to stroke it. Contrary to popular belief, they are not slimy to handle but their skin is made of lots of shiny



scales, which gives the illusion of them being slippery. All the snakes in the temple were of the same breed and I asked the monk if they were poisonous. He said that they were all extremely poisonous. I then replied that 'I assume that they have had their poison removed' and he said that they were holy snakes that were not interfered with and that none of them had had their poison glands removed. They were well fed and as long as nobody upsets them they wouldn't bite. Holy snakes!!!

Before heading back to Georgetown we went to a large aquarium. DD+Y hadn't been there the day before because by the time they had got this far it had been closed. We all spent about an hour there and it was well worth the visit.

Doug wanted to head back early so he could find a dentist and as we were driving into Georgetown he saw a dentist's surgery and stopped the van. The dentist was able to see Doug straight away and was able to re-fit his cap immediately. Though when he came out again he felt a bit groggy and asked me to drive the van for the rest of the way back to the hostel.

DD+Y decided that they wanted to go to a post restaurant that night. The price they intended to pay was well outside our budget so Louis, John and I went out together for our meal. We had a walk around the town after our meal and stopped at another restaurant to have a drink. On the wall was a sign in many different languages that said, "No spitting". From memory it was in English, Malay, Chinese, Hindi, Thai and Arabic; there may have been one or two others, but that is all I can recall. I offered to buy it to keep as a souvenir, but the owner of the restaurant didn't want to sell it. He said I could get one made

for 50 cents, but that wouldn't have been the same. I offered him a dollar and got the screwdriver part of my penknife out ready, but he still wouldn't sell it, so I gave up asking.

Soon after we got back to the hostel, DD+Y came back in. They had had a steak supper in one of the European style restaurants and it had cost them more than M\$6 each, almost 10 times the price we had paid, but still a lot cheaper than it would have cost back in Europe or USA. We were all going our different ways the next day, so it was time to settle up. The ferry over from Butterworth was free in that direction, but Doug would have to pay the fare when going back to the mainland. We readily agreed to add half of the fare to the overall expenses, which together with the fuel costs since leaving Bangkok, converted to Malaysian dollars totalled M\$71.40, which divided by six came to M\$11.90 each. In sterling that worked out at £1:13:0 (£1.65) for the 1501 kilometres and the trip around the island and I thought that was pretty good value. We sat around and chatted until the early hours when the warden made one of his rare appearances and asked us to be quiet and go to bed.

Saturday 1st February 1969.



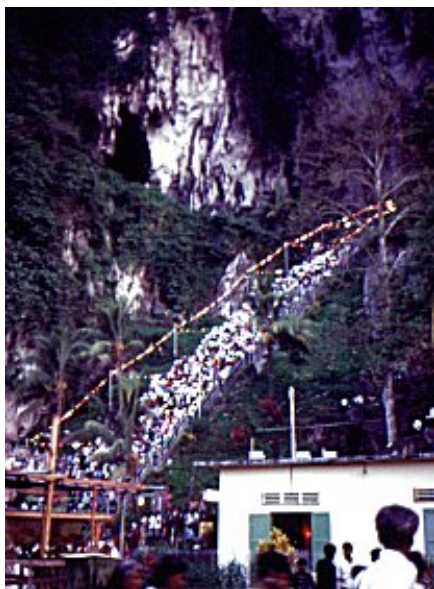
The next morning we were up early. The six of us all had breakfast together, then as Doug was also going to the ferry, he offered us a lift. We all posed for a photograph by the van in front of the hostel before saying our goodbyes to John who had decided to stay a bit longer in Penang, then the rest of us set off. Doug dropped us off south of Butterworth on the main road to Kuala Lumpur. Before they drove off we agreed to meet up with them in the KL Youth Hostel when we arrived. Once again we started hitching.

Everybody in Malaysia refers to Kuala Lumpur as KL, and from here on, so did we. We soon found that hitching in Malaysia was very good. We got our first lift within 10 minutes from a man with three children in the car. One of the children had a hair lip and couldn't speak, which was a shame because they were lovely kids. The others spoke English to us and asked us questions about where we were from. One thing we had already found in Malaysia was that everybody spoke English. If we asked them "do you speak English" before we started speaking to them, they would reply in an offended tone "of course I speak English". And they usually spoke English very well. I would revisit Malaysia and Singapore 31 years later in 2000 and although a lot of people still spoke excellent English, the ratio was well down on the almost 100% of 1969. It is now more like 75% but I can't complain after all, I am the foreigner.

The first lift took us 29 miles, the next lift came after a wait of just 15 minutes in a petrol tanker that took us to Ipoh. While walking out of Ipoh we were picked up for a lift for 24 miles, then our final lift in a Willyx jeep the rest of the way to KL where the driver dropped us right outside the Youth Hostel.

We decided to cook our own meal that night so we went out to buy some food. While we were in the kitchen cooking our meal we got chatting to a couple from Liverpool who were heading in the opposite direction. They had their own car and were on their way to Penang to catch the ferry to Madras. We were able to give them some advice regarding the route that they had not managed to get up to now. While we were talking to them Yvonne came into the kitchen. When she saw us she shouted out excitedly "it's the Bopsys". She then dragged us out into the common room where Doug and Don were. Doug and Yvonne had decided not to sleep in the van while in KL and had also checked into the Youth Hostel. Doug and Don ended up sharing a room with Louis and I. We spent the rest of the evening chatting to the English couple and Doug was able to give them some more advice about driving to

Europe.



Doug had heard that the Hindu festival of Thaipusam was due to take place the next morning at the nearby Batu Caves. The hostel warden advised us not to miss it and to get a very early start if we were to see the best of it. So we got up at 5 o'clock the next morning and all piled into the van. It was still dark when we set out and on the way we stopped for a quick breakfast. Even at that time of the morning there were traffic jams and it seemed that the entire population of KL was also heading to Batu Caves. We had to park about half a mile away and walk the rest of the way.

We came across a funfair and had a look around, not realising that this was not what it was all about we began to think what was all the fuss about. We walked through

the funfair and came to a large paved area with a large set of concrete stairs leading all the way up to a cave set almost at the top of a large limestone cliff. What we now saw and the atmosphere around can't adequately be described in words. There must have been tens of thousands of people there all heading up to the cave and the staircase, which must have been 25 feet wide, was thick with people. But it was not the caves that everybody had come to see, it was the people that were participating in the festival that was the attraction.

There were men who were obviously in a trance. They all had at least one short spear stuck through the side of their faces. The spears pierced the side of their mouth, would pass through the tongue and out of the other side



of their face. Some even had another smaller spear run vertically through their protruding lips and tongue. Their bodies were decorated and they carried what appeared to be a sort of shrine which was usually attached to their neck, shoulders and upper torso by more spikes that had been driven into the skin. Despite all the mutilation, there was no sign of any blood at all. The participants were all in a trance and seemed to be doing some sort of dance as they headed for the steps ready to climb the 272 steps to the top. They all seemed exhausted at this point, but most of them made it to the top. The odd few that collapsed were put on stretchers and carried up to the cave. Once in the cave they made their way to the back where the priests would remove all the spears. As we climbed the steps we would see some of the participants coming back

down carrying all their spears and their costumes. Despite having had so many things stuck into and through them, none of them seemed to have any marks on them afterwards.

From what I could gather by talking to people, the reason for taking part in this event is a way of giving

penance or thanks to God for having done something for them during the year. They have

to go on a very strict diet and abstain from sex, tobacco and alcohol for a number of weeks beforehand. Apparently if they don't adhere to the rules strictly then they will draw blood and may suffer serious injury when the spears are put in. Somehow the diet prepares and protects them.

It was a long climb up the stairs and the staircase was packed with people. There was a section kept clear so the participants could get past unhindered, but with them being in a trance, occasionally one would veer off into the crowd and everybody would scatter to clear a space for them. Some of them had to be assisted by volunteer helpers. When we eventually reached the top what we saw was a massive cave that stretched out in front of us and went far back into the limestone cliff. There was daylight at the far



end, so there must have been a hole in the roof. There were thousands of people up there and the cave was packed. There were a number of shrines around the cave where services seemed to be taking place, but the participants were all heading right to the back. After half an hour we hadn't progressed very far. It was bedlam and we decided it would take us all day to get to the back, so we gave up and came out again, which took just as long as getting in. The view from the entrance to the cave over the Malaysian countryside was fantastic.

It was nearly 11 o'clock before we reached the bottom of the steps and there was no sign of DD+Y so we

walked to the van where we found Don. It was already more than an hour past the time we had arranged to meet at the van, though Don was also late he had only been waiting for about ten minutes and was about to give up. We left a note on the windscreen to tell them we had been then started walking. The traffic in both directions was chocker and hardly moving at all. It looked like it wasn't going to move for hours and we were far better off walking, in fact we seemed to be moving faster than the traffic. Don and I walked along together, but Louis walked faster and got ahead of us. After we had walked for about two miles we came to the main road where the traffic was flowing more freely and we managed to get a lift from a truck that dropped us all outside the Youth Hostel. Doug and Yvonne made it back about an hour later.

After the early morning we decided to have a shower then go to bed to try to catch up on the sleep we had missed. There was a radio tuned to a local station that playing all the latest pop music. We hadn't heard very much pop music since leaving home and it was good to listen to while lying in bed. Amongst other song I heard for the first time was the new scaffold song "Lilly the Pink", which I thought was great. The radio station must have thought the same because it played it many times that day. It is funny how hearing a song can bring back memories of a certain place, but now whenever I hear Lilly the Pink, I always think of KL youth hostel and that lazy afternoon.

The next day we all decided to go into KL to have a look around. The Youth Hostel was on the Ipoh Road a good few miles out of the centre and Doug had agreed to give us a lift. At first we

thought we had missed them, but when we went to the cafe next door to have some breakfast we found them all having their breakfasts. After breakfast we all piled into the van, except for Yvonne who wanted to stay behind and have a rest. On the way Doug stopped to buy a new tyre to replace one that had almost worn out. It cost him M\$22 including the inner tube. We then visited the art gallery where Doug and Louis seemed to be enjoying themselves. Don and I were not too fussy on art galleries and we managed to



prise the other two away. We then went on to the Parliament buildings and the National Monument. We then had an ice cream together then Doug and Don returned to the hostel to collect Yvonne. They gave us a lift through KL and on the way we passed a large Mosque where Louis decided to get out to have a look around. I carried on until we reached the post office where I bought some postcards of the festival to send home. The others were setting out to drive to Singapore that afternoon, so I said goodbye to them. We had been given an address in Singapore where all the backpackers stayed and I passed it on to them and arranged to meet up sometime.

No city visit could be considered complete without a visit to the American Express office. The last time I had collected mail was in Bangkok and I had expected there to be quite a few letters, so I was quite disappointed when there was only one letter for me. I also asked about Louis and there was a letter there for him from Michelle that had just been marked up as "return to sender". I told the clerk that Louis was now here and asked him to hold on to it, but he showed me a letter addressed to the manager that Michelle had sent asking for it to be returned. He agreed to hang on to it for another day or two, though Louis called in himself a little later in the day and collected it.

I then caught a bus back to the hostel but on the way it broke down and we all had to get off. I must have looked lost because a group of schoolgirls came over and after asking me where I was going they helped me to get on another bus that was going along the same route.

I arrived back at the hostel just as it started to rain, which was lucky because I had left my washing hanging outside to dry. I was able to get it and re-hang it inside to finish drying. Lou came back shortly after. He had bought some butter and a loaf of bread and proceeded to make a stack of toast. A girl I had previously met in Goa had arrived and she had a jar of coffee. There was also a group of Australians and a Frenchman who had travelled up from Australia who were all on their way to Calcutta to catch the Indiaman bus to London, so we all sat around and enjoyed the toast and coffee together.

That evening we all went out to have supper together and when we returned we found that the Land Rover guys from Bangkok had arrived. We all sat around together and chatted until well after midnight.

On **Tuesday 4th February 1969** we messed around for most of the morning and it was almost midday before we set out to head for Malacca. The bus stop was right outside the hostel and while we waited for the bus to come along we tried hitching. A car stopped for us with a Volkswagen badge on it, but it was not of a shape that we recognised. Up to now VW had only made the Beetle and the Combi Van. This was the first of their new models that had only recently come on the market and it was the first time we had seen one. The driver had spent two years studying in Liverpool and was delighted to have met us. He dropped us at the central bus depot in KL where we caught a bus that took us six miles out of the city before we started hitching again. Within minutes a mini stopped for us and we had a bit of a struggle getting to squeeze our bags into it, but as we always had in the past, we managed it in the end. The driver introduced himself to us as the karate teacher, the champion of Malaysia and he was going all the way to Malacca. On the way he stopped at Seremban to show us the park that he thought would be of interest to us. Just before we got to Malacca he tried to shut his side window but it had jammed, so he took both hands off the wheel to try to get some leverage. He didn't notice that the car was veering

off the road and heading straight for a tree, but fortunately Louis pulled the steering wheel to avoid the accident. He was so grateful to us that when we reached Malacca he took us to a cafe and brought us drinks and some cake, after which he drove us straight to the Youth Hostel, which was situated a few miles to the North along the coast road.

We had to collect the key and leave our YHA cards at a house further up the road and we were the only ones in the hostel that night. We missed the company we had been accustomed to from other travellers or guests. It is the first time we had been on our own since Bulgaria and it felt spooky. Being well out of town there was not really anywhere around to eat except a club about a quarter of a mile along the road. We had a meal there which was a lot more expensive than we were used to paying, not only that but it was not all that good. The only good thing was that we had the opportunity to watch some television in English, but we were also the only ones in the club apart from the staff. We went back to the hostel a little after 9 o'clock and read my book until it was quite late.

It must have been the accumulation of late nights and early mornings coupled with the fact that there was nobody else around to disturb us, but the next day neither of us woke up until after mid-day. Louis went out to find some food and came back with a large bunch of bananas. We



then slept on until after 3 o'clock when we showered and went down to the club to have a drink. The busses into town only came every two hours and we had just missed one, so we started walking in to town, hitching as we went and before long a car stopped that was being driven by a Scotsman. He had been living in Malaysia for the last five years and introduced himself as Marcus. Before dropping us off he drove around Malacca and showed us the sights. He then arranged to meet us at his club at 6.30 where he offered to buy us both a drink

We spent what was left of the afternoon looking around Malacca, which used to be a Dutch settlement and the architecture was certainly a lot different than the rest of Malaysia.

At 6.30 we went to the Rest House/Rotary Club to meet Marcus. He showed us around Malacca again then we returned and he bought us some Satay, which is a typical Malaysian dish made from either beef or chicken kebabs and served with a delicious peanut sauce. He then bought us a meal before taking us back to his home a few miles up the coast past the Youth Hostel. He had a wonderful place and he showed us around every room. He had servants who brought us coffee and real Dundee cake, which we enjoyed immensely. We were supposed to be back in the hostel by 10.30, but it was 11.30 before he arranged for one of his servants to drive us back. When we went into the hostel we found that a Swiss boy had checked in and he was still awake. He had spent the last six months working in Australia and was now on his way home again. We chatted for an hour or so before going to bed.

We decided to spend another day in the Malacca youth hostel and just laze around. We didn't get up until lunchtime and went to the small shop that Louis had bought the bananas from the day before, but today the bananas were all green and not ready to eat yet. We did buy a pineapple for just 10 cents and some cakes. We did buy a loaf of bread but when we opened the packet it was all mouldy so we took it back in and the shopkeeper gave us our money back. Around 8 o'clock we went back to the club for our evening meal and after we had eaten we sat and watched a film on television. We went back to the hostel and wrote some letters and at 10.30 the warden came around. He told us it was time for lights out and locked the door. The Swiss guy was still out so when he came back at 11 o'clock we let him in through the window.

In the morning we packed our bags ready for the journey to Singapore. This was the final leg of the journey that we had originally planned before we found we could go through Indonesia and we were

feeling rather excited about it.

We started hitching outside the hostel, but there was very little traffic on the coast road so after waiting an hour we started to walk. We eventually came across a small cafe where we stopped and had our lunch. After lunch we started to hitch again, but when the local bus came along we took it into Malacca. The next bus out was not for another half an hour, so we started walking and before long a lemonade truck picked us up. He was going to Yong Peng, about 65 miles away and while we were in the truck the driver kept offering us free drinks of lemonade. It rained for most of the journey, but by the time we got off it had dried up again and the weather was good.

We walked out of the town and were soon picked up by a Volkswagen Beetle that was going all the way to Johore Bahru (JB), the border town with Singapore. The driver was a police officer on his way back from KL and he was very friendly. He had a fantastic stereo system in the car and played the 1812 overture, which sounded just as though the orchestra was in the car with us. I was in the back seat and just put my head back, closed my eyes and listened to the music. At one point I opened my eyes to see where we were, just in time to see the driver flick the ash from his cigarette out of the window and it blew back straight into my eye. I yelled out and he stopped the car to offer me assistance, but none of us had any water to wash out my eye, so he drove on until he found somewhere where he could get some water. It was very painful, but after I had washed it out the pain soon went away. A bit further down the road one of his hub caps flew off and we spent the next ten minutes searching for it. I was not too happy digging around in the undergrowth at the side of the road because I had visions of disturbing a snake or some other local poisonous creature, but eventually I found it and the driver put it back on the wheel. Ten minutes later it flew off again, but search as we might, this time we couldn't find it at all.

When we got to JB it was dark. The driver took us to the police headquarters and bought us a drink in the mess. We decided to stay in JB that night and cross into Singapore the next morning rather than trying to find somewhere to stay at night, and our driver took us to the local youth hostel, but it was closed. We then decided to cross into Singapore after all, so the driver dropped us off at the entrance to the causeway. He took some letters that had Malaysian stamps on them to post for us and we thanked him for all his trouble.