

Laos

Sent: 2003 07:30:20 -0500 (EST)

Subject: "Joyful All the Way"



back clue to unpopular demand, your faithless writer says hello from bangkook (the ironically named "city of angels"), last episode involved some predictions and plans about what was expected to happen in my travels into laos. and sure enough the plans went off flawlessly. that is to say the trip went sideways right from the start. the only good thing about plans is watching them change.

proudly carrying a fake north face pack (who can afford a real one?) I made it to the golden triangle to find not one sign saying "you are here", but instead a plethora of signs saying just that, I imagine they have a competition amongst themselves to determine just which sign is exactly "here" and what other are really "there." the various souvenir shops use the sign to draw people close enough to engage them in a deal. unfortunately the fake north face pack wasn't up to the demands of a trip to the golden triangle, so the strap broke. in tourist land it's easier to replace than to fix, so I did. after convincing the girl in the shop that indeed what I had was all I needed, and that I didn't need a monster pack like all the rest of the tourists, she sold me a cute little pack with a cool logo on the back that says "joyful all the way." now with a new mantra to engage on the road of life, my trip into laos seemed a guaranteed success, I should note that the phrase "joyful all the way" is the second most useful phrase to have with you while on the road. the most useful phrase is found on the back cover of the hitchhiker's guide to the galaxy, where you'll find the comforting and helpful phrase "don't panic."

John Says This

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by the way, I'm writing today because my horoscope said I should. sometimes its important to befriend such unknowns while in hostile territory. besides, it gives me an excuse.

back to the plans: the trip down the mekong was two days of stunning scenery and great chats with fellow travellers. night one was spent in a village hanging by the side of the river. was able to finagle a room with a view of the mekong, which seemed like a good idea at the time. the next morning I woke up to the feeling that I was dying. I was not able to breathe. as I gained consciousness I realized that it was not my problem but rather that the wind coming off the river was blowing all the wood smoke from the restaurant below into my room. so much for the view. for a year and a half of travel I have been carrying a little prescribed vile that has the third most useful travel phrase printed on it: "in case of respiratory infection take three tablet daily." I had always wondered what context might generate the need for such a remedy. I found out that travel on the mekong is such a context.



I'll skip over a few days to tell you a bit about the plain of jars. my plan was to solve the mystery once and for all (and perhaps get rich in the process). one thing I did determine was that there's not one plain, but three. and indeed each site has a grouping of more than fifty large stone jars: some are six or seven feet high, while others are a few feet shorter. since they're been left for who knows how long, they are scattered randomly--some upright, others not. the greatest story tellers (anthropologists) say the jars are probably funeral urns, or maybe for making wine (but definitely not both). I prefer the laotian view that the jars are wine goblets for giants who lived in the central plains some time ago and would get together on some (as yet undiscovered) mountain top to drink wine. for me, the jars provided a quest and that was good enough for me. travel is always more fun if you have a goal, a quest, a purpose, a reason, travel is just a concentrated form of life, after all. the only theory I could come up was developed as I leaned on a jar to look at the other jars. I realized that the jar height was perfect as a leaning device.

thus, my theory is that the jars were built by a long-gone chinese civilization to lean on as they contemplated the other jars. I don't expect to get rich on this theory, as a result I decided to go to vietnam, our friend robbie burns said "the best laid schemes o' mice and men gang aft aglay." he is often misquoted, for me the plans did change when offered a job back in bangkook to teach at a business communications school, that required my coming here to talk. I did that. we haven't finished the talks yet, but for reasons I'll explain in a minute, I bought a ticket to hanoi leaving tomorrow, after being Qn the road for awhile, you realize that your destiny can change with the blink of an eye (let alone the wink of an eye-'-but that's another story).

thus, delaying travel by as little as two minutes might mean that your whole life may change. that's why for me choosing a destination and a time to go there are more than logically thinking through the pros and cons to calculate the best way- there is no best way, only different ways. what helped me make this decision was the film "the quiet american."

the day after seeing the film I went to my favourite ticketing agent to say "ore way tohanoiplease." (you know you've been around a place too long when you've bought more than one ticket out of that place). what follows is a movie review, and since I may have the claim to having the world's shortest acting career, I feel I have the credentials to comment on any movie, before I talk about the quiet american perhaps I should tell you about my acting debut. a rather far out friend of mine here who himself is a character out of a tarantino film said I should talk to his friends (everybody has "friends" here) about their new film. its called "blood, sex and madness." after two years on the road I figure I know quite a bit about each of those, so I thought, what the hell, this is something I haven't done before. fortunately I have recently seen the film "mulholland drive," so I knew what a casting call was and when the director said "here's the part you're reading; you have five minutes to get into character" I knew exactly what he was talking about. I had no idea about the process of "getting into character" but I knew it had something to do with being someone else. due to a stroke of crazy luck the character I was "reading" was a half-crated business man who was trying to collect some money. after my "performance" the director said "is that how you cross-examine people." I said "no, that's the way I talk to clients who haven't paid their bills." life teaches in strange ways, somewhat piqued by my rather unique acting "talent" they then asked me to read a part for a psychologist. for this "getting into character" was easy: I just played Eraser crane, I know the purists out there will say "Eraser is a psychiatrist," but I didn't have time to squabble. when once asked what the difference was between his role as a psychiatrist and that of a psychologist, fraser paused and then said ,we get to prescribe drugs." I didn't have time for that. Anyways, I'm going to vietnam tomorrow. I hear there's some good agents there. however, I expect they're more of the secret type than the casting type, back to "the quiet american": just go see it. while you're there I hope you can breathe it and feel it.asiais a full-time experience that pulls you in all directions at the same time. listen to what fowler says about the first few minutes of being invietnam. after all, graham greens is a top shelf writer. many years ago when I read some of his work I thought what a marvellous life he's led: living in a far-away country for awhile and writing a novel about it, more importantly, his sense of where to go is in retrospect a summary of the key historic moments of the twentieth century, when I read the quiet american I thought that if the american people had read it at the time it was written, then they would not have been so eager to go there in an attempt to change destiny. ultimately, as we know, destiny changed them.

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I've got to go to a meeting, so I'll sign off by sharing with you a game I play from time to time while watching cat tv, (cat tv is something I learned from my cat: cats have an immense patience to sit at a window and watch the world go by), especially in places like bangkook, where there's lots of strange looking foreigners ("farangs" in thai language), I have some fun by making up joke names for the ill-dressed blokes who wander the streets or sit in the bars having their early morning beer. it seems its always guys who get the brunt of my silent name calling. I find that two core joke-generating apparati are most useful: for english-looking fella8 double-upped english names are best; and for the more european- looking lads I find a "von" very useful. for example, the brit twit in the flood pants might be smidly crimpwhistle, or perhaps nelson wimpbottom, on the other side of the street, the germanic dude in a bad shirt might be hans von stinkle, or maybe yon van nitbut. you see, there's no end of fun watching cat tv. and you can bet that all those cats out there are making up names for you. with all of that I bid you a fond farewell. and remember "everybody loves somebody sometime."

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