

Old Farts in China Travelogue



Day 1 Thursday 29th July

Hello from Yangshou! We are finally here and it is fun! Adam and Sugar met us at the airport as planned and after a quick shower and brush up we are currently in a cafe on West Street where Adam is munching on his Campazola cheese which he specifically requested we bring him. Immigration did look at it a little curiously but passed it nonetheless.

More to follow (And at this point neither you the reader, nor I, knew quite how much more...)

Love to everyone,

Greg and Penny



Day 3 Saturday 31st July

Dear All,

Well, I finally made it to an internet cafe. There are loads of them about but we've just been too busy having too much fun to get to one before now!

I simply can't attempt to describe ALL the wonderful things we've been experiencing but will try to scratch the surface for you.



you' and 'sorry'!

We are staying in a middle of the range hotel with the funniest bathroom. The shower is simply attached to the wall next to the sink and so when you shower everything gets soaked including the loo and the waste basket! The toilet is western and boasts a square (yes square) toilet seat. All kind of peculiar but fun. We are not on the main drag but even so the little street below us is amazingly busy from early morning to late evening. We are awoken by loud chatter and honking of horns at variable pitches. Greg lay in bed yesterday trying to count the number of different pitches and lost count.



river from Yangshou, we watched peasants ploughing and planting their rice paddies with primitive ploughs and water buffalo while smart cars with guys on mobiles sped by.

This is truly a spectacular province with regard to the scenery. Mountains rise vertically from the flat surroundings forming various shapes. They are known as 'The Grotesque Peaks' which is most unfair as they are quite spectacularly beautiful. Must have been some

Adam and Sugar met us at the airport in Guilin,- a beautiful airport compared to Guangzhou which was a bit of a dive. Sugar is as sweet as her name and oh so tiny! She has been the best tour guide and interpreter we could hope for and manages to get everything at an incredibly low price (even when to us it starts that way anyway!) They see the Westerners coming a mile off but she's not having any of it! She speaks very good English and I'm very impressed by Adam's ability in Chinese. I can now say 'thank you, no thank



I sat watching out of the window while he slept this morning and saw the whole world go by: hawkers of souvenirs and fruit, business people, old ladies taking the air, smart young ladies, bicycles by the hundred carrying families, buses and tricycles with trailers, a school of children all chattering at the tops of their little voices, a tea seller, an old lady digging through the garbage from the hotel opposite and on and on.

The variation in wealth is as wide as it could possibly be. Yesterday, on our bike ride up the



travel-jaded foreigner who made such an ill-tempered observation. All have poetic names such as 'Wife Awaiting Husband Rock' and 'Fiery Monkey Mountain' etc. Around the bases of the mountains are the beautiful verdant paddies. Some are used for fruit growing,- lots of peaches and oranges and persimmons and things I don't know as well as areas of lotus, their huge leaves growing up well above the water (the root is eaten but I have yet to try it.)

We walked to the river yesterday and saw an occasional cormorant fisherman. Later we met an elderly fisherman posing for the cameras in town.



We also visited Buddha Cave yesterday and Greg and I changed into our swimming costumes in a little shack, donned helmets and plastic shoes and followed our tour guide, a young student doing holiday work, into the deep dark recesses of a cave full of amazing rock formations some of which are supposed to resemble Buddha. You have to have a pretty good imagination but it really was quite something. We followed our guide through various narrow passageways, bending double in some places and climbed down ladders here

and there until we reached the river at the lowest part. We bathed in the mud and floated in about 12 inches of water, viscose with particles of mud. Then we moved to another part of the cave where crystal-clear water flowed and we cleaned off before climbing back out and into the humidity. We had done extremely well not to slide and hurt ourselves in the cave and had been very glad of the helmets but, would you believe it, as soon as we stepped outside Greg managed to slip down the steps and graze his butt!



I guess we rode about 6-8 km out to the cave and then back one km to Dragon River Bridge where we were going to take a river trip back down a ways.



We loaded the bikes (Adam and Sugar had a tandem) onto the bamboo rafts and settled back to enjoy the trip but then there was some contention about the price which Sugar had negotiated (they tried to double it) so in the end we unloaded the bikes again and rode to another place where we got a better deal and floated up and down for an hour. Beautiful scenery along the banks and a cormorant fisherman preparing for his evening's fishing as well as a Chinese singer regaling a party group through a megaphone aboard a larger raft.



We had cycled almost all the way back to Yangshou before I took a tumble and badly grazed my leg, arm and a few other places. Guess I was getting too damn confident! Adam and Sugar insisted I go at once to one of the many roadside 'pharmacies' where the lady first offered me some massage oil! We did finally manage to discover some kind of disinfectant and cotton wool but God, did it sting! It was much worse than the fall but I want you all to know I was very brave!

I should have mentioned the traffic,- you take your life in your hands when crossing a road. There is some token idea of a right side and a wrong side for driving but it really isn't considered very important and the multitude of bikes, trikes, motor bikes, vans, cars and buses going different ways (on the sidewalk too) make it all very 'exciting'. You have to look both ways ALL the time. I have learned to team up with a Chinese person to cross the road. Roundabouts are fun as everyone goes any way they please,- the police too!

We had breakfast at a street cafe: Guilin noodles and jiao-zi and bao-zi dumplings with soy and chilli sauces. Interesting and very tasty. A mother with her 18 month old sat opposite us, she feeding the baby who couldn't take his eyes off me as I played peek-a-boo. He just stared, no smile, just a long, long stare. His mom would pop one end of a long noodle in his mouth and almost without his seeming to suck it would disappear!



Last evening we met Laurie and Betts, two older Canadian friends of Adam's who worked at the language school with him. We had Chinese beer (not so bad Pete) and wine and then went out to dinner at Belle Vue, a restaurant on the river. We had a fabulous meal for nine (other friends came too) all for about £2.00 per person. Afterwards we went for a drink back to West Street.

This morning we had a late start and have had a pancake breakfast at a cafe on West Street - a vibrant place to sit and watch the goings on -

and a cup of coffee, my first since getting here and quite good. Now Sugar and I are going to shop till we drop and then it will be time for a massage and then a show tonight by the river. This show is supposed to be an incredible feast of sight and sound, the backdrop provided by the amazingly lit Grotesque Peaks. I can't wait and will tell you all about it next time. Everyone is now reading over my shoulder and suggesting we have other fish to fry.

Love to you all..

Pen

Greg's Version

Good morning (actually afternoon) from Yangshou - our first experience of a Chinese internet cafe and, while it is somewhat disconcerting at times not being able to read many of the messages which are being displayed on the screen, at least when I press the relevant keys on the keyboard, most of the time it seems to be what I was after.

This place is wonderful - the scenery is spectacular although the weather is perhaps somewhat warmer than we are used to and the humidity must be approaching 100%. Fortunately, Pen and I are dressed to the situation in shorts, t-shirts and sandals.

We've only been here two days so far but already we have crammed a lot of things in. We've eaten exceedingly well (now there's a surprise) and extremely cheaply - dinner for 12 people came to the grand total of about 24 pounds (no pound sign on this computer) or roughly \$40 or so. To be fair that was only about twenty items off the menu and it was also one of the finest establishments in town with a glorious view over the river.



Yesterday we hired bicycles and cycled out of town about four miles to visit a cave which Penny and I went in (with our personal guide - Adam and Sugar had already been so stayed on the surface). It took about 90 minutes to explore the caves, the highlight of which was swimming in mud at the very bottom and then rinsing off under a waterfall, all about 100 meters below the surface. A few tight squeezes for someone so fat as me but good fun.

Then we bicycled up a dirt track to another beautifully located restaurant for yet more food and then boarded a bamboo raft to float along the river for an hour or so before cycling back into town. The traffic is unbelievable - the concept of separate sides of the road for drivers heading in opposite directions is merely the basis for some negotiation as buses, cars, motor cycles and bicycles head in all directions from anywhere they like, including travelling around traffic islands/roundabouts in any direction they please. As a consequence one is continually bombarded with the cacophony of car hooting, buses honking and motorcycles blatting interspersed with the tinkle of bicycle bells. This is supposed to give the millions of pedestrians some indication that they



are about to be run over but in fact, since the noise is constant, one pays very little attention to it. Why there are several dozen traffic accidents every few seconds is beyond me.

A bit later today we are all off for a full body massage and then an open air performance of some sort just out of town. Off tomorrow to Long Ji (Dragon Backbone rice terraces) with an overnight stop and then back to Yangshou for a few more days before off to Kunming, Dali and ultimately, Lijiang.

All this in two days - I don't know how long I will be able to stand the pace for so far it is fantastic.

More when we get another chance.

Love to you all,

Greg





Day 7 Wednesday 4th August

Dear All,

We're just back from Long-Ji, a fabulously beautiful mountainous region about three hours journey by mini-bus from Yangshou. The mountains are like wedding cakes with hundreds of tiers composed of rice paddies sometimes up to their peaks. They are a sight to behold. The rice is as green as can be and the edges and banked sides of the tiers an even brighter green. They are grass and provide the 6 inch walkways between tiers. Every inch of space is used for rice and closer to the village of Pin-An, where we stayed, similar tiers are used to grow every vegetable



imaginable (but no spuds!) The buildings are built of wood in the old Chinese style and have the most wonderful old tiled roofs. Tiles are not nailed down at all but they hold each other on. No house is on the same level and walkways between houses are stone slab paths about two feet wide that go up hill and down dale.

The owner of the hotel we stayed in sent his little four year old son with his pal to show us the way to the hotel (he owns two). Laden with our heavy back-packs we attempted to follow

these cute little lads who took off at a great rate and didn't look back, apart from when we took their photo. We did make it to the right place in the end and found very comfortable rooms with the most spectacular views. We had chosen one of the 'best' hotels which cost us £3.75 for the

night! There was a great restaurant called 'The Countryside Cafe' which served both Western and Chinese food (Mexican too!).

Much building is going on in Pin An,- practically all of wood which is brought in on the backs of people and the odd pony as the last climb to the village is on a narrow slab path which takes about 30 minutes from the road. Hawkers from local 'minority' peoples followed us everywhere trying to sell their wares and get us to ride in sam-pans up the mountains. These looked very comfortable with velvet cushions, but the idea of having some poor Chinaman carry us up a mountain smacked rather too much of colonialism and we declined. I learned to say 'Wo - shee - wan - zo - lu' which means 'I like to walk' but that didn't seem to impress them too much as they still kept trying to persuade me that I'd far rather ride.



We went to the 'show' in Yangshuo on Friday night and I just can't begin to do it justice here, (especially on a keyboard where most of the letters have disappeared!) It was theatre at its most spectacular with a cast of 600+ and an audience of 1800! The director of the production was Zhang Yi Mou (Johnny Mo), a big fish in the film industry here, (Nick, you may know of him - he did 'Hero'). It takes place on a great inlet/lagoon of the River Li, specially dug, and with the beautifully lighted backdrop of the mountains it was a thing beyond belief. Amazingly beautiful. The only drawback to such a show is that a Chinese audience NEVER stops talking!

We also had a great massage on Friday, all four of us. Tomorrow we'll have a hair-wash and massage before breakfast at the 'Best Coffee Shop in the World' on West Street. Then we're going to shop again and I've learned to barter pretty well from Sugar. I can count to ten and say 'Too much' so I'm okay.

Day after tomorrow we hop on a plane for Kunming and from there we visit Lijiang and Dali. Have a look at them on the internet if you're interested. Adam and Sugar are giving us the best time ever.

Hope all's well at home. The others are all waiting for me (again) so must go.

Love to you all from Yangshuo,

Oh, the joys of accessing one's e-mail through the fine facilities of an internet cafe in Yangshou - I spent about twenty minutes yesterday evening describing (in tedious detail, no doubt) our expedition to the Dragon Backbone Rice Terraces in Longsheng only to have someone sit down at the terminal next to mine and switch my computer off, thinking that he





top of the mountain. The rice terraces for which this place is famous are hundreds of years old and carved into the mountain side which is very steep - some of the terraces have room for only one row of rice - and literally everything the villagers need has to come up the mountain side on someone's back. We've got some fabulous photos (we hope) but, in the meantime, have a look on Google for Longsheng and, in particular, for photos of the Rice Terraces - simply unbelievable.

was switching his on. I stared in disbelief as the screen went black - just as I was about to press "Send". So, I am afraid you will have to do with the abridged version today.

We travelled from Yangshou to the Longsheng area by bus on Saturday morning - about four hours of very adventurous driving up winding mountain roads to the end of the road. From there it was about a half hour walk up a narrow mountain path to the village of Ping An at the



We stayed the night in Ping An in a "five star" hotel which boasted hot water 24 hours a day. Regrettably, Pen managed to use the last of the gas in the gas cylinder (which has to be carted up the mountainside on someone's back, remember) so the rest of us had to make do with cold showers - probably just as well.

Having wandered around the village on the second day we endured another hair raising bus ride back to Yangshou (look it up on Google as well - wonderful town with spectacular scenery).

Today we have done a bit of power shopping - Pen has got very, very good at haggling (although undoubtedly probably still pays more than the locals would

) but she always feels a great sense of achievement when she beats them down from 80 pence to 35 pence for something which the locals would probably buy for about 10 pence. We also enjoyed a hair wash and scalp massage and now are off for a bit more to eat to be followed by



more shopping!

Tomorrow morning we're off to the airport for a flight to Kunming where Adam and Sugar need to visit the Vietnamese Consulate to secure their visas for Vietnam. Then, after a night in Kunming we are off to Dali and then on the Lijiang.

More to follow at some point, I guess.

Love to you all,

Greg

Day 11 Sunday 8th August

Dear All,

I think Last time I wrote we were still in Yangshou (I could be wrong!) Anyway, we flew to Kunming,- Sugar's first flight ever and she really enjoyed it. She took multiple pictures of clouds



on Adam's digital camera. We arrived about 3 pm and had a look around the town and checked into Camellia Guesthouse which was fine. Went out to a cafe called 'Mama Fu's' and had 'Over the Bridge

Noodles' apparently a local specialty. We slept in a four bed dormitory but it was okay,- they tell me I didn't snore!



The computers had all been down the evening before and so we had to get up early to book tickets for the train to Dali which left at 9 a.m. The ticket office opened at 8 and we discovered that all the seat tickets had gone so it looked like we'd have to stand for 6 1/2 hours. The only alternative was the express bus which actually takes longer. I thought it best to stick with the train as it's stuck on tracks and can't go madly overtaking on blind bends etc.

We took a taxi to the station but the crush of people and traffic was too great to allow us close access so we had to don our packs and push through the crush and the rain to get there in time. We didn't need to worry about the seat situation, within a few minutes we had all been given seats by kind people who were prepared to squeeze up for us. And so we travelled to Dali, chatting with all and sundry. The Chinese love to practice their English and are so friendly it's just wonderful. I did manage to finish my book - 'The Kite Flyer' by someone Houssein and a great read. The scenery along the way was beautiful and ever-changing with every inch of space used for vegetables and rice. As we ascended the mountains I noticed a good deal of hemp growing everywhere and we discovered why when we hit Dali. No,



it's not a hippie paradise, they make beautiful cloth and clothes from hemp in the region. More shopping!

Once in Dali we took a No 8 bus to the town and spent a little time choosing a guest house. Adam had been recommended No 5 Guesthouse but they were full, so we ended up in No 4. It had a beautiful courtyard and very musty and damp-

smelling rooms. The beds were clean and dry however and we were just fine. The air was so heavily laden with moisture that even though it was much cooler than Yangshou and Kunming, everything stayed wet. We hung our damp laundry out and it was still almost as damp two days later!

Dali is a very attractive little town with lots of little stalls and shops everywhere. Occasionally you find quite a sophisticated looking shop with really well displayed clothes that could grace any high street in England. I bought a linen



pant/skirt thing and Sugar, a pair of black pants. Greg and Adam both bought hemp shirts and look spectacular in them!



We have found numerous really funny signs with misspellings and literal translations of words that make no sense at all. The funniest was in our bathroom. It requested us 'please not to confuse the land towel...' I'll have to explain more later as Adam, Greg and Sugar are all yelling at me to get going.

Forgot to mention we are now in Lijiang and there's a show on tonight in the Old Town Square and I'm holding things up. Will finish later,- much more to write about.

Love, P



Day 12 Monday 9th August

Well, we've been out, had dinner, watched people floating lighted candles in lotus shapes down the canals - so pretty - and watched folks dance around a great bonfire in the town square to music from speakers in the trees. Now we are back at our lovely guesthouse with a crowd of young people all watching football (China versus Japan). Greg and Adam have naturally joined them. There's quite a lot of noise going on and a lot of friendly banter as there are a couple of Japanese supporters here too.



Now where was I? Oh yes, 'confused land towels' in Dali. Have you worked that one out yet? What the sign in our bathroom meant was that we should not mix up the bath towels and the 'bath mat' (a somewhat strange but understandable translation). Needless to say I think we left a very confused 'land mat' when we left Dali. Our laundry was done free but the difficulty was drying the stuff, - almost an impossibility.

We had two nights in Dali and two good dinners, one at Kaiyis Cafe (Katie's) where we tried lotus root, - very good) and various other dishes ending with a potato pancake with sour cream. This last was pretty bad and the sour cream turned out to be Thousand Island dressing! Meals are interesting in that they come to you as they are cooked and in no particular order so you all tuck into whatever arrives regardless of who ordered it. We are dab hands at chop sticks now!



At Kaiyis Cafe we also ordered a bottle of 'The Great Wall' wine and drank a number of toasts to Greg's Uncle Chuck who had sadly died the day before. He was a great guy and Greg was very fond of him so it came a little hard although Chuck had been ill for some time.

(Whoops! Someone just got a goal, - must have been the Chinese! What a racket! Screams, whoops and stamping from behind me.)

The next morning we had breakfast at No 5 Guesthouse as Adam had heard they did a good buffet. Unfortunately we were a little late and so got the tail ends. Have you ever tried cold French fries for breakfast? Back at No 4 Adam and I had a game of ping-pong until I gave up and a little Chinese guy moved in. He must have been about 7 but would have wiped the floor with me. Adam just about held his own, then Greg decided to give him a go and wished he hadn't. We lunched at the Sunshine Cafe which looked out on a back garden where a wizened





we walked down the new central part of town where a beautiful 'river' has been fabricated/constructed. Along the edges are willows and carvings and the water rushes over stones and pebbles. There is a central kind of dais where some little girls were playing with their parents. Greg was a great hit,- they found him very funny and he ended up getting his picture take with them. The kids here are very much loved and cuddled and encouraged to practice their English with all foreigners. Some



large snooker hall and I'm pleased to say Greg and I beat the pants off Adam and Sugar. Actually we gained more from Sugar's miss-shots than by our own prowess.

Had fun with the hot water to our bathroom. It took about 15 minutes of running the tap for it to get to us. Next morning we awoke to the strains of 'Happy Birthday to You' played over and over again. I was just about ready to throttle whoever's birthday it happened to be but later discovered it was just the garbage truck doing its round. Everyone rushes out with their bins!

old gentleman was tending his bonsai. I managed to get across to him that I like to garden too and he gave me a beautiful smile then popped into his 'potting' shed to get his coolie hat as it began raining.

We climbed up the north gate in the wall of the old town where there was a little alter with incense burning in front of one very austere looking Buddha and another very jolly little fellow. Later



kids are very shy but are pushed forward by eager parents keen that their offspring should have every opportunity. We are also frequently accosted by older students wanting to practice their skills of English conversation.

The shops and markets have all sorts of strange goods out front. One particular thing I asked about, which could have been seaweed or a type of fungi, turned out to be dried frog skins!

In the early evening we played snooker in a







The views as we wound our way uphill into the mountains were beautiful and we found ourselves above the clouds at one point. Unfortunately the driver was a bit of a nutter. Everyone here drives with their horn blaring and he was no exception. He also seemed to think he had to overtake anything that had the audacity to be in front of us. We did see one bus, front end in a rice paddy, and hoped that might give him pause for thought. No way.

It was pouring with monsoon rain when it came time to leave and we had to dash up a little lane, running like a river, to get to the mini bus which would take us to the bus station where we'd board our bus to Lijiang. We were all completely drenched by the time we boarded the bus with lots of other sodden travellers and remained wet all the 3 hour drive.



stopped eating. Yak meat is rather good...

Lijiang is absolutely gorgeous. Unfortunately it's rather a popular tourist destination for the Chinese too - a kind of Polperro. Despite this, however, we are enjoying it immensely. We climbed up to a pagoda viewpoint on Elephant Mountain this morning and had great views of the old and new towns. Have wound up at a terrific guesthouse belonging to a friend of Adam's,- A'Chuen. He's a lovely guy and very hospitable. Great cafes abound and we haven't

Well the game's over,- Japan beat China 3-1.

Time for bed so we can manage more adventures tomorrow. I think the plan is to hire bikes again(!) and cycle to a village about 30 minutes away. It's a Naxi (nachi) village,- they are the local minority people here.

All for now if you've managed to get this far.

Lots of love,

Penny



Well, I've lost track of who I've written to or what I've said so apologies to those of you who may have already received some of this news and/or to those who could care less - you know where the delete key is.



which my mother is a recipient).

Lijiang is everything Adam said it was - beautiful old buildings with canals running alongside most of them. The place is a rabbit warren of narrow streets with shops selling all manner of goods for tourists but fortunately every other shop seems to be a cafe selling vast quantities of food so no danger of our starving to death while we try to find our way around the old town. I suppose the only drawback to Lijiang is the hordes and hordes of tourists, 98% of whom are Chinese the rest being a mixture of Korean and Japanese with a small collection of

We travelled from Dali to Lijiang yesterday - a three hour minibus adventure. The driver clearly was studying to take over from Michael Schumacher at Ferrari and some of you will remember that Dali is way up in the mountains and Lijiang is even higher so the overtaking of other vehicles at the brows of hills and around blind corners makes for an exciting journey. We made it unscathed and only passed two accidents enroute (perhaps I shouldn't be writing this in a message in



westerners, some Germans, Dutch and British youngsters - for some reason which I haven't quite worked out, we do seem to be the most elderly of those on the backpackers' trail. We stayed last night in a very comfortable hotel in the old town but Adam has arranged a room for us in a guest house run by a friend of his for the rest of our stay here (he didn't have a double room with bath available on the first night). It's very comfortable and, of course, very cheap - about five pounds per night.

Lots of little outings planned for the next few days around and about here and then back to Kunming to collect Adam and Sugar's visas for Vietnam.

Off now to eat some more.

Love to you all,

Greg & Penny

Day 13 Tuesday 10th August

Can you stand it? I'm back!!

I've had a number of messages from friends asking how the hell am I finding the time to write so much. Do they really mean 'why' the hell am I writing so much? If the latter well, I'm just going to choose to ignore you and if the former, well it's just so much fun that I can't bear not to tell you all about it. So hit the delete if you want,- you won't shut me up.....!

Now, where were we? -

I think when last I wrote the China v Japan football game was going on. That morning we had wandered along Canal Street looking at menus from which to choose our breakfast venue. The one we decided upon had the funniest spellings and I wrote some of them down to share with you. On the Spaghetti page were the following spellings of that very word:

SPAPHITTI, SPAAHETTL, SPAGHITTI, SPAPHETTI! A few other particularly good ones, which I will leave you to work out for yourselves, were: WOLDF SALD, SOUR MICK, WEGETAL, CJICKEM AND STEAMBOAT (the last you'll never get!). One more gem: SHUTEED SPAHETTI WIGH BEER TENDER LOTN. How's that?!

The next morning we woke fairly early to some clonking from above. The floors are just one layer of thick plywood and there's no carpeting so the slightest creak from above is really loud. Went for breakfast to Mama Fu's where Greg had the weirdest hot chocolate. It was a grey sludge and smelt very strange. Needless to say he decided to leave it.



It was a kind of Chinese housing estate and, although on the whole much more attractive than a

council estate in the UK, Adam mumbled and grumbled all the way. I could see why when we hit the old village which was awfully pretty and much more higgledy-piggledy and full of character. Unfortunately even there the cafes had opened and the usual clothes and trinket shops abounded. Everyone has to make a living I guess. Adam talked about how last time he was there and he and Sugar were in need of some food, they asked an old man where they might find food and he at once took them into his house, opened the fridge and told them to choose whatever they wanted and his wife would cook it for them!

Took a taxi from Lijiang to 'Long Tchuen' a little mountain village about five miles away. Adam remembered it as pretty much untouched two years ago. Sadly a whole lot of changes have gone on since then and we had to walk through a vast area of new construction. Most of it was housing with shop fronts and the wider than normal lanes had the usual canals running alongside them. At various junctures trees had been planted and the canals widened out into pretty pools.



The soil was fabulously rich and dark and friable (those of you familiar with my love of soil and a good pile of well rotted muck will understand) and the 'allotments' tended by the old folks were



beautiful. I could have got stuck in then and there.... I had to suffice with a photo opportunity beside a great pile of compost.

The oldies have a good life here. It may be hard work a lot of the time and 'squattie' toilets can't be easy on old bones, but the community spirit and the regard in which they are held is lovely to witness. They spend a lot of time sitting on shop doorsteps just gossiping, and they love to dance. In the square in Lijiang they are out in force most of the day. They make a long line,

arms linked, and do a kind of step and kick dance that moves slowly round in a big circle while one of their members stands in the centre holding the ghetto blaster playing the latest Naxi CD! The men join in too and anyone is welcome. Thus they keep fit. They also do a lot of baby-sitting and clearly adore their grandkids.

The canals are very useful for all sorts of things, - in Long T'chuen keeping your cola and beer cool is one of them and if you want to buy a drink they just hoist up the bamboo basket and you take your pick. Washing is another and the water up



there is crystal clear and very cold coming straight off the mountain.



I haven't yet mentioned Sugar's appetite have I? She is a bottomless pit and at 5 foot nothing we can't think where she puts it all. We can have an enormous breakfast and within half an hour at most she's looking for a snack. Fortunately snacks are constantly available on every corner so there's no problem but Good God, why she isn't as fat as she is tall we just don't know! Greg says it's worms, at which she goes off into fits of giggles!

I think I'm going to send what I've written so far as I'm afraid we might have another electricity cut since they happen rather frequently. Will continue in a mo.

I'm back.

I think I've met just about every little mutt there is in Lijiang by now. They are generally very small (not worth eating!) and of a Pekinese(ish) variety. They do vary however, and my best mate looks to be a beagle, bloodhound, dachshund mixture. He's a great character and like all the mutts here he lives the life of Riley. You see them everywhere just taking themselves off down the lanes to collect their pee-mails and send a few, visiting a



pal or two, finding a bit of left over chicken in the garbage of a cafe, sitting outside the dried yak meat shop - hoping.... The Chinese are clearly fond of them but in a slightly more distant way than Europeans. They are horrified when I pick one up or give it a good tummy rub! This is why I make friends with them so easily,- they never had it so good!

Greg developed a bit of a grumbly tummy later in the morning so he and Adam and Sugar went back to our guest house to nap for the afternoon while I took myself off to explore. Somehow, whichever way I went, I kept coming out at the same place - the water wheels - a pair of giant wheels in the canal at the entrance to 'Old Town'. One third of Lijiang was devastated in an earthquake in 1996 and has since been rebuilt much as it was, but with new infrastructure. The new town faired less well than the old and lessons have been learned from it and lots of money has been poured in by the government. I kept practicing saying 'Tshian fan jey,' that's the name of the town square, just in case I got lost, but it wasn't necessary.



In the evening we met another old friend of Adam's, 'Yanza,' who took us to his girlfriend's silver shop where we bought a couple of locally made bracelets for about a third of the asking price. Yanza then came for dinner with us to a local Naxi venue where the food was half the price it usually is and very good. We all five ate extremely well for about £3.75. We finished with Naxi flat bread in honey which was rather like baklava in Turkey,- very yummy.

Passed a shop selling locally made and dyed table mats and coasters I rather liked the look of. Yanza did a deal and they cost me about 50p a mat and 10p a coaster! He also did a deal for tickets for us to see the local Naxi folk singing and dancing show in town for the next night.

Day 14 Wednesday 11th August

What a night! I mentioned that the walls and floors were thin didn't I? Well, a party of three arrived at 3a.m. and moved in above us. It was AWFUL. It sounded like someone sat on the bed above me and systematically over and over again picked up and dropped a heavy pair of boots! They chattered at high volume and then all took showers, the water running through pipes in the wall right next to my head. It was over an hour before they began to quieten down and then I couldn't sleep so tried to read with a torch under the bedclothes. It was like being back in boarding school!

I did eventually fall asleep only to be woken by a VERY loud mobile playing the Marseilles (sp?) right outside our door and a French accent yelling 'Allo, allo allo' and then jabbering in French. This happened three times and I reached the end of my tether. Can you believe this, I yelled "FOR GOD'S SAKE SHUT UP!!" Yes, me!!! There was a shocked silence and then some

laughter and then, oh wonder of wonders, they moved off to make a racket elsewhere and all was silence.

I felt a bit bad about yelling and decided to get up and take myself for a walk. I ended up at 'Le Petit Paris' a cafe run by a French guy called Joel and his Chinese wife. I ordered hot chocolate and sat watching the first Chinese Tour Troupes passing by, cameras and mobile phones at the ready. At least one person in every half dozen says hello.

Cafe Street is about 10 meters wide with the 2 meter wide canal running down the middle. The sidewalks are 'cobbled' with large rectangular blocks of rough hewn stone and the cafes all have low walls and shuttered upper halves which open up completely. Small rectangular wooden tables covered with bright locally dyed tie-dye table cloths and with benches or chunky wooden chairs are lined up along the canal so you can choose to sit out under the willows and beside the rushing water (full of large goldfish) or in the darker cooler cafes. It's a great way to while away a few hours and catch up on your journal.

The girls who work in the cafes, and some of the boys too were out slooshing off the sidewalks with buckets of water hoisted from the canal. They keep the place very clean and tidy, sweeping up litter the moment it's dropped. The only thing Greg and I feel we'd have trouble getting used to is the hacking and spitting, done mostly by the older generation.

Got into conversation with a sweet waitress called 'Yanzi.' She has taught me a little more Chinese.

Have just noticed the time and have to dash as we're moving on by 'sleeper' bus to Kunming this evening and thence to Sa Pa, the border town of Vietnam. Will have to finish from there.

Lots of love to you all



As Ms Playchute composes yet another epic travelogue on an adjacent station in the Lijiang internet cafe, I'll just jot a few notes as we prepare to leave Lijiang....

We leave tonight at 7.30 on the "sleeper" bus back to Kunming - another experience! Adam has described the experience of travelling on the sleeper bus as one of the worst modes of transport available to mankind so, as you can imagine, our expectations are very high. At least, since we booked the tickets yesterday afternoon, we have secured bottom bunks which understandably are considerably more sought after than those on the top. No doubt Ms Playchute will provide you all with a full description whenever we next hit an internet cafe.

Lijiang has been great. As we have said, it's a very beautiful town (the Old Town, at least - the new town is typically loud, dirty and chaotic) and we have thoroughly enjoyed our

time here. The only drawback, as I said before, is the teeming hordes of Chinese tourists but even they have their entertainment value. It really is quite interesting - although they are on vacation, they seem to have a mobile phone perpetually glued to their ear and/or they wander around the beautiful Old Town viewing their experiences through the LCD screen of their video recorders or digital cameras. Now, I've taken scores of photographs but I do think I tend to get a better view with my own eyes than through the viewfinder but what do I know?



The weather has been great - generally hot and sunny but lacking the humidity of Yangshou or Dali - a few little showers now and then but generally quite bright blue skies. Having said that, the clouds around Jade Dragon Snow Mountain have been annoyingly persistent and we've only been able to see it a couple of times - it's quite a sight, however, when the clouds do clear sufficiently. It's only about ten miles north of Lijiang but stands something like 18,000 feet high and is quite spectacular.

Naturally, there has been no let up in the eating department - there are so many cafes from which to choose and everything is so cheap that it's become our custom to order five dishes for the four of us to share. Why we arrived at the magic number of five escapes me just at the moment but I think it was something Penny decided on. In spite of all the exercise we've had (climbing the Elephant Mountain, climbing to the Pagoda and wandering around the myriad streets and alley ways) as Julie once said, Mr Shrinkie seems to have sneaked into our clothes cupboard - I imagine we shall both resemble Buddha



when we get home. As well as eating, the other activity in Lijiang which we have particularly enjoyed is, of course, the shopping. Some of you will know that we backed a bag full of books for Adam; that bag is now stuffed to overflowing with an assortment of shirts, blouses, skirts, etc. so that we shall almost certainly have to purchase another one to cart home all the loot we anticipate acquiring in Hanoi. As I think I mentioned before, Pen has become

particularly adept at haggling. Although she is not as ruthless as Adam or Sugar, she is pretty hot and has become particularly accomplished at the various hand gestures to signify "not a penny more" as well as the facial expression of shock and horror to denote "You must be joking; that's far too expensive." No doubt we still end up over paying but she always seems to be happy with the bargain she's secured and has even walked away without purchasing anything on several occasions.



The next few days will tend to be somewhat less entertaining, I suspect, as we have a fair bit of travelling ahead of us. As I said, tonight we leave for Kunming and then, after spending one night there, we travel on another long bus ride down to the border with Vietnam. The plan then is to spend a few days in Sapa before catching a sleeper train down to Hanoi, arriving there either Monday or Tuesday of next week by which time the mansion of the UN representative there will

undoubtedly look marvellously attractive.

Thanks very much to all of you who have had the chance to reply - it's good to hear from you and glad to hear that all those of you who have been able to get away seem to have had such a good time.

Love to you all,

Greg (& Penny, frantically typing away at another station)

Day 17 Saturday 14th August

Everyone's expectations have been raised to such an extent by Ms Playchute's extended descriptions that we have spent this morning looking for an Internet cafe so that she can continue her novel. Since we missed yesterday (and the day before, I think), I have been instructed to copy type her description of the past few days while she continues the explanation at a further point in time. Confused - well I certainly am but that seems to be my role in life. Apparently, I am allowed to interject occasionally in the following provided (a) it's not rude and (b) I always enclose whatever I want to add in brackets so that you can distinguish between what I am saying and what she wants me to say. So, here goes....

Dashed back to the guesthouse thinking Greg would be getting worried because I was so late. I got back, breathless, to find them rocking on the veranda in the sun reading their books. They had told me we had to leave at 6.00 but, in fact, we didn't need to go until 6.45, the rats.

I mentioned getting into a conversation with 'Yanzi', a waitress at the 'Petit Paris' cafe. What a sweetie - she has some English but wanted to learn more so we gave each other lessons. I learned to say, 'sai lai yi bei jrekuoketi' - 'Another hot chocolate.' and a few other things. Try saying 'wu' - it's only a short sound but the beginning and ending are higher than the middle so you do kind of a swoop, but it mustn't be too much of one or it just makes them laugh and means bugger all!

Yanzi left to serve a customer and immediately a smart looking gentleman came and sat himself down opposite me to engage in conversation. You're never alone for long! Then, three girls arrived asking if they could take my photo. What they really meant was that they wanted their photo taken with me so each sat down next to me in turn while the others snapped the photos. (I always knew she was 'hot' and, indeed, Sugar has taught me to say 'Wada mei nue' which means 'My beautiful woman.' Each time I say it, though, she cracks up so I suspect my tones are not quite correct and I am actually saying, 'I sleep with a dog.')

I eventually excused myself and returned to the guesthouse where Greg was up and A'chuen and the guesthouse 'maids' were watching Nicholas Cage in 'Matchstick Men' on the DVD with Chinese subtitles. Talking of DVDs, I forgot to mention that we watched Fahrenheit 9/11 upstairs in the Balcony Cafe in Yangshou, only a week after watching it in England where it had just been released. Adam spotted it for sale and decided to take the risk that it would be a reasonably watch-able bootleg copy, which it was.



We all went for breakfast at 'Le Petit Paris' and had rice, pork and vegetables, curried rice, French toast with honey and rice with bacon. Weird, I know but it's what goes here. Greg and I are getting fatter by the minute. (No wonder it takes Pen so long to write her e-mails if she includes the details of our meals, particularly since we seem to be eating for seven or eight people at each sitting).

Greg and I walked up the lane to the pagoda that rises above the town and is beautifully

floodlit at night. It was a lovely spot with great views of Old Town so more photos. Saw some little grass woven frogs on the way down and bought two to add to my collection of frogs (Ely Goldsmith, watch out!) They are varnished and have moveable limbs so Greg at once put them into a very compromising posture - typical.



Smells of all varieties assail your nostrils at every turn, some wonderful and some pretty noxious - pungent spices, steamed and roasted corn cobs, fried flat breads, fried potatoes on sticks, tofu on sticks, all sorts of fruit and then, of course, there are the toilets, some of which are kept very clean but by no means all. I couldn't help thinking of Sal and her incredibly sensitive nose - I think she'd find a clothes peg an absolute necessity here. The garbage vans come every day so there is very little mess and, as I said, they are constantly sweeping and washing down the sidewalks.



We went to the Naxi concert in the evening and had the best seats in the house thanks to Yanza. It was really good. There was a great narrator - of course we couldn't understand a word - but he had great stage presence. The orchestra sat on tiered benches at the back of the stage, all dressed in gold gowns with high headdresses and red sashes. There were about

20 of them and there wasn't an instrument I could name - most were stringed but there were also a couple of big gongs and drums and a kind of wooden keyboard thing. A few women played lute type instruments with two strings.

The show told a sort of story of the Naxi people and their ancient Dongba religion. It was interspersed with folk songs and dances from ancient times. I was amazed at what the human voice can do. Many of the dances involved a group of eight beautiful girls and eight gorgeous young guys, some of them quite



nomadic/Tibetan looking. The Naxis were a nomadic people so I guess it's not surprising. Lots of whirling and whooping - much of the wilder dances reminded me of North American Indian dances. A few major characters appeared including one with a pheasant on his head who blew two enormous horns at once and then two very large conches. The 'monkey,' a staple character in Chinese folk lore, was a dynamic old chap in skins, whose eyes revolved everywhere as he danced. All very colourful

and theatrical.

We'd ordered a number of 'chops' - carved stones used to stamp your name in Chinese characters on letters, etc., from a young chop man and went to collect them after the theatre. We watched him carve the last couple and were staggered at his speed and skill. It was all done completely freehand with a small, sharp chisel, in a matter of about five minutes each - such precision!



Next morning, more hot chocolate again at Le Petit Paris where Yanzi and I both proved we'd done our homework. Greg joined us and took a photo - she wants me to send her a copy - hope I can copy her Chinese characters onto an envelope.



Back to A'chuen's to pack and then a last bit of shopping. I haven't mentioned the big carry on about my purchase of a beautiful, but large, cormorant fisherman's hat have I? It has become known as 'that damn hat!' Greg likes to make a great fuss about it and how crazy I was to buy it at every possible juncture. Now I've bought some Chinese lanterns so you can imagine the fuss. 'Those damn lanterns' at every turn.

After lunch we decided to take a taxi out to the nursery where Adam taught for a short while. On arrival, we found it all shut up and he discovered that the headmistress he had known had moved on, so sadly no go. A bit of a disappointment since Sal and I had sent a playchute to them and I did want to meet some of the kids - too bad.

Now I'm up to where I was in the internet cafe sending you my last e-mail and dashing back thinking I was late. The bus trip is a whole other story and I'll save that for next time.

(Pen is composing part two of this epic – 'The Bus Trip' - as we speak so for now, all our love to all of you - Greg & Penny)

Day 17 Saturday 14th August

Boarded the sleeper bus at 7.30. We got almost the whole 'ground floor' at the very, very back of the bus. Five narrow mattresses, so we had a bed partner on one side. We put Greg next to him, then me, then Adam and then Sugar next to the window as she suffers a bit from travel sickness. The bus was quite ingeniously laid out and carried about forty would-be sleepers. We had about twenty inches width each so were very cosy!



It all began okay with lots of hilarity - I mean would you want to sleep slap-bang next to your parents/son/his girlfriend? We had shared a dorm before, you'll remember, and there certainly wasn't any room for hanky-panky here!

The Chinese all got themselves sorted out,- without quite as much giggling. One man with his baby son, about a year old, on a top bunk!

We had seen long stacks of firewood, split lengthwise and wired together, for sale all over the place for the last few days. It turned out, as it grew dark, that this was the night of the fire festival and all along the road as we passed through hamlet, village and town, were these tall stacks burning from the top down like huge torches. Smaller ones were being carried about mostly by little boys, - can you imagine English parents allowing that?! Whole communities were out to enjoy the show - a kind of November the 5th on August the 11th! It became clear that some of the bigger torches had been laced with firecrackers which exploded at random moments. We saw quite a few fireworks going up too. Apropos to that, I'm reading a book Adam lent me written by Lin Yutang, a brilliant Chinese scholar who spent much time in the west and wrote more than 50 books. This one 'My Country, My People' was written in 1935 and in it he says that the Chinese characteristic of pacifism is best illustrated by the fact that they invented gun powder but preferred to use it to make fireworks to celebrate their old fathers' birthdays rather than for any more aggressive purpose.

The torch flares continued everywhere,- in the foreground and away in the distance, wherever there were a few houses I guess. Then the rain began and I guess it spoilt all the fun.

Lijiang is at 2,400 meters, so we had to drop a tremendous amount in a short time. It was dark and raining with occasional brilliant streaks of lightening flashing down the sky. The driver, however, didn't seem to think this should prove any kind of impediment to his progress. By the time we made our first loo stop (about 2 hours in to the journey) my right leg ached from

pressing on the brake. Well, somebody had to! Our second stop was at about 1 a.m. I had dozed and was awoken by the roaring of multiple engines, bright lights and loud commands jabbered through megaphones. If I hadn't known better I'd have thought I was in a WW2 Japanese concentration camp. It transpired that all buses, having descended from Lijiang, had to have their 'underneaths' inspected for safety. This was very encouraging but it took about forty minutes for our turn to come, such was the number of buses lined up. China can move people let me tell you!

We set off again and from that point on things got pretty bad. Adam had warned of some road construction going on on the new road and we had to take the old road. Well, for the next six hours we rolled and lurched and bumped from side to side on the worst road imaginable. You know the 'Discovery' Landrover ads,- well this was as bad terrain as anything they had to cope with, without the suspension! At one moment, about 3 a.m., when all but me were just about managing to doze, there was an almighty explosion and white smoke filled the air all around the bus. We had had a blow out. The others woke, inquired what was wrong, and went back to sleep since we were still for a moment. We had to trundle very slowly on to the next village where mechanics were woken (imagine it Michael!), donned their overalls and proceeded to change the wheel.

Off we went again in the same fashion. Then suddenly we lurched up onto (wonder of wonders) a smooth surface. It was fabulous and lasted all of two minutes! This went on all the rest of the way, 10 minutes of hell (especially on the bladder,- Greg's) and then two minutes of bliss. Lines from two old songs kept coming to mind, can't remember who they were by but groups in the 70's: 'We're on the road again...' whenever we hit the smooth bits, and 'You shake my teeth and you rattle my bones...' on the rough bits. If those flab vibrator machines people used to strap themselves into ever worked then I reckon we should have lost a good few pounds on that trip.



8 a.m. found us arriving in the hustle and bustle of Kunming once again, - myriads of bicycles and honking taxis. VERY glad to be here we were.

We've spent the rest of yesterday and today relaxing and recuperating. Visited a Buddhist monastery this morning and a pagoda yesterday Watched kite flyers in the city centre and lots of little dogs playing on a green patch between the main roads. Tonight we travel on overnight to Sa Pa the border town just into Vietnam. We will

spend a couple of days there. Guess how we're travelling tonight? Yes, you've got it, sleeper bus.....

More later if we survive. At least it's uphill so my right leg won't have to work so hard.

Love to you all,



Day 19 Monday 16th August

(Back, by popular demand, the Internet diary of Ms Playchute with added comments and asides from me. I gather that the response to the previous double-act was so positive that this time I have even been given permission to write my own paragraph! On with today's episode....)

Did I complain about the previous night on the sleeper bus? Well, let me tell you, our hearts sank as we approached our new commodious form of transport across the smelly, teeming bus yard. You remember those Asian buses you've seen on the Internet/TV laden so you can't imagine how they can possibly move? Well, believe me, this wasn't far off it. A smaller bus with just one gangway - two adjoining bunks on one side and one on the other; the same above with 23 bunks in all, STUFFED to the gills with large cardboard boxes labelled 'tobacco' and multiple other packages and bags. The bedding couldn't have seen a washer in at least 6 months; possibly not ever. Worse than anything, however, was the incredibly rank pong filling the air, I say 'air' but you could have chewed it. I don't think I can even begin to describe it to you but I did spend some considerable time during the night trying to come up with words and phrases to equal it: wreaking, malodorous, rancid, suffocating, asphyxiating, stomach-churning, nauseating, wretch-inducing.... but couldn't. It was not of human origin but what kind of decaying matter - vegetable or animal - could smell that bad? We had to open the windows and gasp in lung-fulls of the perfume of diesel oil and bus station toilet. Sal, you would have expired.

After a bit of argy-bargy with the bus driver we managed to stow our packs where they were at least in our view for the night. Sugar, being the shortest, got a double stack of stuff at the bottom of her bunk. (To be fair, I think Pen should have mentioned that the argy-bargy involved persuading one of the passengers who had already boarded that he would prefer to have a single bunk on his own, rather than sharing with one of these foreigners. You can see why he initially resisted - the prospect of sharing a bunk for the next eleven or twelve hours with the

wonderfully delightful Penelope or Sugar would perhaps just about compensate for the nauseatingly pungent aroma. In the end, however, he shifted and we had a double bunk each).

Imagine my surprise then when a very polite Home Counties voice said in my ear, 'Would you possibly mind taking a photo of us in our den?' I turned around to meet a cute young lass and her boyfriend through the little hole by our heads.

They were just out of university and enjoying the salubrious surroundings about as much as we were. We all laughed together, however laughter involves rather swift and inadvisable gulps of air so this was somewhat attenuated. I enquired as to their home towns and was thrilled to discover that they came from St Albans! Steven then clarified that he always says 'St Albans' because people know of it but that, in fact, he actually



came from Harpenden and Claire from Redbourn, both about three miles from St Albans. Now, for those who don't know, this was something of a coincidence since I was born in St Albans, moved to Harpenden aged about five and then to Redbourn aged nine! Small world, what?! We duly took their picture and then ours and Sugar and Adam's.

Fortunately, one cannot capture odour on film.... (As we awaited the departure, we had a nice chat and, at one point, Claire commented that this sleeper bus lark was "fun". Fun is

certainly not the adjective that springs to mind immediately but I suppose youngsters these days have a different view of what's fun).

Next came the hilarity of trying to get our bus out of the bus station yard. Much yelling, hooting, banging on the side and near misses later we joined the honking river of the main road out of Kunming. No picturesque flares to light our way this time but an express motorway, as smooth as silk - Aaah!

It was possible once underway to slide the windows wide and allow the blast of 'fresh' motorway air to fill our starved lungs. This became a little too cool as night drew on

however, so it became a toss-up between a cold frontal blast or snuggling down into the grungy bedding and sticking my nose in Greg's armpit - I chose the latter. We did sleep a little (she may have done but the stench in the bus was generating waves of nausea and I spent most of the night trying to avoid vomiting all over our delightfully disgusting bedclothes).



Our transport turned out to be the Chinese version of the Number 11 omnibus, stopping at frequent intervals to deliver packages (one we were sure was a pizza), pick up packages, drop and take on passengers and generally take its time about getting anywhere. Loo stops were generous -

Greg, Adam and Sugar always availing themselves of these but me, with my generous capacity, holding out for a slighter higher standard of facility. I have always been fortunate in this regard and have come in for much envy in my time for this particular attribute. Not something you could put on a CV but very worthy nevertheless.

Not only were we the pizza delivery and the Number 11 but three times we were awakened somewhat abruptly by men in uniform with bright lights demanding passports. Decided our bus must be a well known and popular get-away vehicle for felons fleeing the country and that the rank pong might be one of them who expired and got forgotten underneath all the packages at the back.

A half hour stop at about 2.00 am for roadside nibbles and loo allowed Sugar to stock up on noodles and soup - it had been a whole seven hours since she'd eaten, so we were feeling a little worried.

Arrived in Hekou, the border town between China and Vietnam, a whole hour early at about 5.30 a.m. and upon disembarking, Greg disappeared as if shot from a cannon into the station facilities to indulge in a bout of explosive diarrhoea, brought on, no doubt, by something he'd eaten and made twenty times worse by the disgusting stench of the sleeping facilities. (Fortunately, it would be impolite to describe the explosive qualities of this particular bout of the runs but this particular session had to be one of the highlights of the trip - the opportunity to enjoy the most basic of Chinese facilities, also referred to as a Chinese slit - just use your imagination, was more than I could possibly have hoped for. After this particular episode I was able to enjoy encore performances in the cafe where the others managed breakfast and while being processed through the Chinese customs and immigration facilities at the same time as completing the embarkation form declaring that I was not currently suffering from shortness of breath, any respiratory complaint nor, of course, diarrhoea. Whilst my fellow passengers were tolerably sympathetic concerning my affliction, when Pen asked whether the explosive qualities of my evacuations enabled me to achieve lift-off I knew that her heart was in the right place).

Cafes open in China whenever there are customers and we found something of a palace just across the street from the customs and immigration building as we waited for the border to open. It had clean loos (Yes, I can testify to that) and a washbasin so we swabbed our necks, faces and hands - you should have seen the grime - and had breakfast.



The border opened at 8.00 with a short military ceremony and flag raising. We could see at least a hundred Vietnamese waiting over the Red River to come through, bicycles piled with fresh produce to sell, the Chinese economy being a little better than that of Vietnam.

It took about twenty minutes to get through the Chinese side - Adam taking the longest since they had to puzzle through his multiple visas and identity card, and they are very thorough (or, very confused).

The Vietnamese side took somewhat longer as we were passed from one counter to another and then back again to the first, filling out forms at each station. Then, our passports all disappeared into an office for about twenty minutes and then we were finally approved and on our way.

Money changers wafted wads of Vietnamese Dong in the hope of US dollars and multiple forms of transport lined the street. We haggled over a minibus to get us to Sa Pa, a 45 minute journey uphill and got the price down to \$2 per person rather than the initial offer of \$10. Claire and Steve were still with us and we'd been joined by a lovely Italian couple as well. We dropped Claire and Steve at the train station as they were going immediately to Hanoi, picked up three Vietnamese women who were also bound for Sa Pa, and proceeded through monsoon rain up the mountainside in a minibus with one operating windscreen wiper, no adequate demisting facilities and doors you had to bang and thump to open.

We continued to collect passengers through the outskirts of Lou Cai until we were 13 in a nine-seater minibus with multiple large backpacks and numerous other parcels. Poor Sugar sat in the front - she had to because of her travel sickness - and I think she was scared to death. The road was of the Lijiang to Kunming variety with the occasional mud slide thrown in for good measure. At times we drove through rivers cascading down the mountainside and a couple of times the engine conked out when we stopped to allow for passing traffic. We held our breath each time until it started again and laughed hysterically most of the way. We may have been inside the van but the rain still got to us through the seals of the doors and the non-functioning windows. Our 'stewardess/conductress', who squatted on the floor whenever a seat was unavailable, was the cheeriest person you could hope to meet. She tried on my 'damn hat' and giggled fit to bust and laughed and laughed at every ear-shattering crack of thunder as well as the fact that we were all soaked. (You can begin to appreciate how we were able to negotiate such a cut-price deal for this transportation. However, even the stewardess/conductress, as Pen describes her, did look somewhat concerned when the rain fell so hard and fast that even the one partially operating windscreen wiper more or less gave up. You will be pleased to note, however, that the driver carried on regardless, moderately oblivious to being unable to see what was ahead). Still, you couldn't not enjoy it! She also seemed to enjoy fondling Adam's knee in the crush - I think Greg may have been a little jealous. (She was very pretty but I wasn't particularly jealous of Adam - it was the motorcyclist we had picked up somewhere en-route who really had a good journey. At various points she placed her hands not particularly carefully between his legs while hanging onto his seat over the more troublesome parts of the road).

Pulled up to the "Mountain View Hotel" at about 11.00 am and got extra soaked running the five yards to the porch while negotiating the shelter of umbrellas extended by willing hands.

And so, on to part two of today's episode....

Sa Pa

Boy! Have we fallen on our feet. After that malodorous bus trip and hair-raising mini bus



ride we find ourselves in the loveliest room with a balcony and views to die for. Not only that but constant hot water and a beautifully clean bathroom too! We are both showered (scrubbed) and changed into clean clothes and feeling a million dollars. The rain is slowing and the view from our balcony (we are high up above a valley) now that the totally obscuring

mists of fifteen minutes ago have lifted, is of spectacular mountain ranges. Waterfalls gush down crevasses and all is green, green, green. Rice paddies compete with vegetable plots, banana palms and stands of bamboo right up to the feet of the mountains, all interspersed with little wood shingled huts. Small pockets of mist still drift here and there in the folds of the mountains. The rain has now stopped. We are SO lucky to be here!

The fanciest of mosquito nets graces our bed and two comfy armchairs sit invitingly on the balcony. All this plus en-suite for \$15 or 235,530 Vietnamese Dong per night. Even the electricity has come back on! Our shower has a gas geyser so though we had to shower in the dark, the water was hot, hot.

Composed a little later:

On top of all that, we entered the hotel to find the lobby swarming with the local kids Adam had told us about. Some of them remember him from two years ago when he had his little goatee beard. They call him 'Monkey' because of it. Just as he told us, these kids, with practically no education, speak perfect English as well as many other European languages all learned through their dealings with the tourists. They are a phenomenon. Each morning they come into town in their minority group costume made of hemp, woven and dyed indigo in their villages, and embroidered beautifully by themselves. They come laden with produce, trinkets or sewn items to sell, but mostly they want to have fun with the tourists.

Apparently our hotel is the most welcoming to the kids especially when it rains, hence the lively crowd ready to greet us. They did not bug us to buy stuff (they are not allowed to in the hotel), just wanted to talk and talk and talk. I am hoping that if the rain really does clear properly over the next day or two we can take the playchute I've brought down to the town football field and introduce them to some games. The kids are very tactile and hug you and hold your hands until yours become as indigo dyed as theirs! They are very cheeky and bright and an absolute joy to spend time with.

The staff in the hotel are terribly polite and accommodating and the food is very fresh and really good. This is a paradise!!

Even later:

Woken by a hammer banging on the other side of our wall at 6.45. Almost a relief to know it can't be THAT perfect. I think the hotel is being extended. Adam says he was down in the lobby by 7.30 and mentioned the banging and the horrified manager rushed next door to tell them to shut up!

Greg has not felt great since our bus trip (I have allowed him to add a little description of his woes in the previous message and think I'll probably regret it when I get to read it) and last evening decided to stay and nap while I went with Adam to see some local dancing at the 'Bamboo Bar' a few doors away. Some of the girls we'd met and a couple of chaps performed the dances, one of them a kind of coy, flirting dance, all very gentle and sweet. The guys did solo performances on various instruments and then the older one, who seemed to be the dance and music instructor, came on stage with a handful of leaves. He proceeded to 'play' one of them. I think they were bamboo leaves. He folded one and put the





fold between his lips and blew so that it vibrated, kind of like blowing on a piece of grass between your thumbs, except that he got an amazing number of notes and melodies out of it.

I left before the end to check on Greg and we decided to



call it a day. He slept well and late (once the banging had stopped) the next morning and though not completely better, he felt he could manage some noodle soup at 10.30. We had cancelled our planned fifteen kilometre hike but by lunch time he felt up to a gentler one. Thus we spent the whole afternoon walking up hill and down dale to Cat Cat, a H'mong village, pausing here and there to soak our hot feet in the racing river. At one point we waded in with a small herd of water buffalo who were mostly submerged, chewing the cud. I've always wanted to swim with dolphins, but wading with water buffalos comes a close second doesn't it? Cat Cat has a waterfall, - not a very long drop but pretty fierce. Having wended our way up steep flights of stone steps and narrow paths to the road after about three hours, we decided to avail ourselves of motor bike



rides up to Sa Pa. It was a blast and the guy who took Greg on the back cheekily called 'Goodbye Buddha!' as he left.

Guess what, at 5 this evening we got to play parachute games and it was a hoot! Greg got lots of pictures and we plan to play again tomorrow. Tourists and kids joined in and all thoroughly enjoyed themselves. You were right about bringing a bigger 'chute Sal, I should have brought a 12 meter!! My mind has gone do-lally on this trip and I could hardly

remember any games but Adam helped and I'll have to have a good think tonight. If you read this very soon Sal, please e-mail me some names of games. I also need a ball!

We stay here until Monday evening when we take the 'soft sleeper' train to Hanoi and our friend Jordy's house.

Love to you all and bless you those who've written and even those who haven't!

Penny

Some of you have the obvious advantage of being on Ms Playchute's mailing list as well as mine, the obvious advantage being that you are in receipt of Penelope's developing

epic novel - the Stragnell's in China and Vietnam. As you will know, she writes her journal up every evening and then composes an e-mail lasting several hours. On those days when we are unable to access an internet cafe, therefore, she composes two substantial e-mails and I have been coerced into copy typing some of her messages - hence the relative lack of information for those of you who are on my mailing list only. I suppose you could ask her if you could be included on her distribution list and, for a small fee in the region of, say, 20,000 Vietnamese Dong, she might just consider it.



If you are, in fact, on her list you will already have had much of the following so you can hit the delete key now. For the rest of you, however, read on.

I think I mentioned that we were planning to travel from Lijiang to Kunming on the Sleeper Bus, which indeed we did. However, to call

this mode of transport a "Sleeper Bus" is to run dangerously close to falling foul of the Trades Description Act as sleeping was something that was virtually impossible. To be fair, one Chinese gentleman did indeed sleep for the whole trip, to judge by the loud and continuous snoring which emanated from the bunk above Sugar. Firstly, however, a description - think of a large coach with all the seats removed. Then, in their place put three rows of bunk beds, one against each side of the bus and one down the middle. Still remembering your coach/bus, you will realize that each bunk, therefore, must only be about 18 inches wide and there you have it. The gangways were about the same width and the bus was packed. We four had bunks at the back of the bus, in the back seat as it were. One unfortunate Chinese gentleman had the dubious pleasure of sharing these bunks with us so we were each in close and intimate proximity with our neighbour, me with the Chinese traveller. While the accommodation might have been conducive to sleep, the road from Lijiang to Kunming certainly wasn't. Imagine the test conditions to which Land Rovers are subjected from time to time and you will have a reasonable understanding of the road conditions between the two. Add to that the fact that the 'good' road is out of action due to landslides or something and the detour (which consisted of little more than a dirt track) added two hours to the journey. Very comfortable as I am sure you can imagine.

We stayed just the one night in Kunming before boarding another 'sleeper' bus to the Vietnamese border. Kunming is a big city with all the noise and congestion that one associates with large urban conurbations. The traffic was almost as bad as London's with one significant difference - the main roads have three lanes on either side, one lane being



reserved exclusively for bicycles and motor scooters. Naturally, this lane is absolutely jammed with all manner of vehicles. How there are not more accidents I do not know, particularly when you see someone driving a motor scooter amongst several thousand bicycles and other scooters whilst keying in a number on his mobile phone and engaging in an animated conversation complete with hand gestures - remarkable.

We did see a couple of lovely sites in

Kunming - a couple of pagodas and a wonderful Buddhist temple before stumbling across the best Internet café we've seen so far. As I mentioned, Ms Playchute had me copy typing part of her epic but there were more than a hundred stations all with reasonably fast internet access and they even supplied complimentary cups of tea which were delivered at frequent intervals to your station. Very civilised. What was more intriguing, however, were those who were accessing the stations. Roughly 90% were young Chinese men who were generally playing shoot and kill type games (including two policemen in full uniform - clearly this is the Chinese equivalent of the policeman's donut break). The remaining 10% were mainly young women who were engaged in video chat sessions with other men and women. Almost no one doing anything so mundane as e-mailing friends and relatives.

We left Kunming on another sleeper bus to the border. While the road from Kunming to the border is very good - like silk compared with the Lijiang road - our accommodation was anything but luxurious. This was the bus from hell - as Pen described it, think of the photos of buses you see on the internet which are jammed with parcels and have several hundred people hanging off the sides - this was our bus with the exception that we did, in fact, have no one hanging off. Mind you, those who might have been hanging off the sides would have probably had a much more comfortable journey than we did. This bus was transporting something to the Vietnamese border which emitted a smell the likes of which I cannot describe; it was positively nauseating and generated in me the desire to vomit for most of the journey. Pen wanted the window closed because she was cold; I wanted the window open so that I could avoid puking added to which, about three quarters of the way through the journey my stomach began to tell me that I had eaten something with which it violently disagreed. A wonderful eleven hour journey.



Arriving in Hekou (the Chinese town on the border) I made my way with some alacrity to the facilities offered in the bus station and enjoyed my first full-fledged experience with the 'Chinese Slit.' My diarrhoea was of the 'explosive' variety and I am moderately convinced that I achieved a couple of inches of lift off during the session. I was able to repeat this performance at the café where we had breakfast and once again at the Chinese customs and immigration facilities just after completing the form indicating that I was not suffering from any contagious disease, respiratory symptoms or, of course, diarrhoea.

Leaving China was relatively easy compared with gaining entry into Vietnam but eventually we passed muster and found our way on to a minibus bound for Sa Pa, a former French hill fort/colony in the mountains and let me say that Sa Pa is indeed very close to paradise. Ignore the fact that we arrived in a monsoon with raindrops as large as grapefruit and the minibus in which we were travelling had only one working windscreen wiper, no demister, windows which did not close (so we were soaked within a few moments), doors which did not open without prolific banging and thirteen passengers and all their luggage in a minibus designed for nine. Another adventure.

We ended up in the Mountain View hotel and Pen and I in a room with a balcony looking out over the valley to the highest mountain in Indochina (I think), Fan Si Pan. It is glorious and the town is very sweet. The local minority children are incredible and, in spite of wanting to sell you trinkets, are very endearing. They also happen to speak fluent English, their French is fairly good, their Spanish passable while their Chinese is basic and their Portuguese is just about understandable and, when they don't want you to know what they are saying, they revert, of course, to Vietnamese or their own local dialect.

We're here for three nights altogether and then, on Monday, off on the sleeper train to Hanoi - an eleven hour train journey. After our delightful experiences on the sleeper buses, I insisted that Adam book us 'soft sleeper' cabins with air conditioning. One can also assume that the railway will be somewhat smoother than the roads so we are looking forward to this journey with somewhat more enthusiasm than our previous ones. No more sleeper buses for me if I can possibly avoid it.

We'll only stay one night in Hanoi at first and then down to the coast for a couple of days before we come back to Hanoi to annoy Jordy and Ching for the weekend.

More later provided Ms Playchute doesn't have several more novels for me to type up.

Love to you all,

Greg

Day 20 Tuesday 17th August

The Next Bit.

Am not sure if I might be missing some of my journal out as I didn't mark where I got up to. Don't suppose anyone will miss an extra page or two however!

We've not been in easy internet contact for a number of days (Sal e-mailed me just to check we hadn't fallen off the edge of Vietnam) and I have a lot of stuff to get down. We haven't been on any more sleeper buses lately so I'm afraid there won't be a lot of laughs for you. The best bits

for you are always the worst for us and unfortunately we've been having a reasonably comfortable time of late so hard cheddar!

I'm picking up from Sa Pa:



Have got to know some of the H'mong girls really quite well over the few days we've been here. They have become very much individuals (as all kids are of course) rather than an ethnic group:

Little Jam, nine years old and the size of a Western six year old. Petit and pretty and adorably sweet, loving and unassuming,- I could have stolen her away.





Thi, the little clown of the group, ten and very pretty, confident and dramatic as well as witty and cheeky. She rubbed my tummy at one point (it was after a large meal I'll have you know) and said 'One baby.' Then she turned to Greg and rubbed his and smiling coyly said 'Two babies'!

Zu, a twelve year old and the gentlest and sweetest of natures. She is a kind of big sister to the smaller ones and very modest, kind and thoughtful.

Co, whom we nick-named 'sulky,' friendly and fun on her own terms but liable to moods. The others were very tolerant of her and would roll their eyes at us whenever she got in a strop.

Zi, fourteen and more brash than most.

Gom, thirteen and more serious and mature. She was the leader in the group dynamics, capable of the sweetest smile but also sudden, inexplicable pouts that never lasted long. She had great persistence in learning to French skip (one of them brought in a long length of elastic and it gave me the idea and two Italian girls remembered lots more than I did) and once she'd got it she proceeded to teach the others and a little French girl with great patience. She would make a great teacher. She has spent longer in school than most. Her older sister, a local tour guide, was offered the opportunity to study abroad by some tourists, but her parents would not agree as they needed her to help on the land and to dye and weave the indigo cloth.



Others like Soma and Goma whom we didn't get to know so well and who were perhaps a little shy but still spent lots of time with us.

The girls all seem resigned to staying where they are and eventually marrying local boys and carrying on the traditional skills of their minority. Perhaps 'resigned' is the wrong word. They all take great pride in their customs and traditions. We simply make amusing and enjoyable interventions in their lives. They do all hope to become tour guides

in their area so that they can show visitors their community and make easier money.

Tours of one to five days are available around Sa Pa and involve much trekking up and down mountainsides and visiting of villages off the beaten track where you get to stay with a family, sharing in their day to day life for a short while. It would have been wonderful to have had the time to do this, - homes are often very primitive and vary in design according to minority group. One of the local groups lives in stilt houses and a number of them in just one room.



Back to the girls,- selling is the most important thing in their day to day lives and has to come before fun, but they could definitely find time for both and enjoyed their relationships with the tourists to the full. Every bus load means more new friends. They are very used to the short lived nature of these friendships but give and take affection constantly. You'll be walking up the road and suddenly a little arm will slip around your waist or a little hand into yours.

They adored the parachute games and we managed to play twice. We would set out from the hotel with 5,6 or 7 kids, gather a few more along the way and then lose a few if they saw an opportunity for a sale. We'd arrive at the playing field not knowing if we were going to have enough to play and then another group would arrive. One would be designated as 'basket guard' and they would all dump their back baskets. We sometimes commandeered help from adult tourists, particularly for 'walking on the water.' They easily had as much fun as the kids and then there'd be the obligatory photo session afterwards.

On the second occasion we played, the only person in the vicinity we could call on to help was a lad of about fourteen. No boys we had invited to play would join in, they are much more stand-





offish and reserved than the girls,- a cultural thing no doubt. Anyway, although very reluctant at first, this lad did join in. I had bought two small, hard, plastic balls,- all that was available in the locality, to play 'Rollerball.' I put one of them down behind me while we played other games, turned around and it was gone! We had seen nothing and were surrounded by quite a wide open space. I got the other ball

out and again put it behind me while I explained how to play the game, turned around to find it had also disappeared and two little lads, about five and six, were legging it away as fast as they could. The fourteen year old let out a piercing whistle and picked up a large stick he had been carrying and the little lads stopped in mid-flight, sheepishly dropped the ball before legging it again! We played 'Rollerball' and then Greg tucked the ball up his shirt for safe keeping,- we didn't think they'd have THAT much audacity but weren't going to take the risk.



After a great session ending with 'Wave' and then me managing to

gather the whole chute in successfully without it touching the ground, we all started off back to the hotel again. On the way we met Adam with a tearful Sugar. The little horrors who had been caught nicking the ball had taken out their anger by kicking garbage at her as she sat

on the steps across the field. Adam was furious. The girls wanted to know what had happened and some went off with him to see if they could find the lads and give them a good talking to. They all joined us back at the hotel after a fruitless search. Ten minutes later, little Tai (the dramatic one) came into the lobby and with flailing arms and flashing eyes and a grin from ear to ear proceeded to tell of how she had discovered the boys in a shop and had given them a severe telling off saying that Adam would be staying in Sa Pa for two weeks and they had better hide because if he caught them they would be in BIG trouble. She said she had 'bopped' the bigger one for good measure! Her dramatic flair had everyone roaring with laughter, even Sugar couldn't help herself although it was so obviously a complete fabrication. That kid should be on the stage.

On our last evening Zu, Tai and Jam had dinner with us in the hotel restaurant,- they chose rice with chicken and pork. We didn't think they would get anywhere near finishing the large quantities but boy! Could they pack



it away. Even little Jam almost finished the lot.

I had bought small things from each of about half a dozen girls during the afternoon but as we left in our mini-van for the station that evening after multiple hugs and kisses and whispers of 'Don't forget me' and 'I love you' from little Jam, more silver bracelets were thrust through the door at us with insistent cries that we must keep them. The hotel staff also gave us big hugs, especially the mum of the little baby girl I had dangled on my knee for half an hour at a time. Even 'Sulky' blew kisses and we left to much waving and calling of 'I will miss you.

I am under no illusion that our departure will affect them greatly,- they must be very resistant to the sadness of partings and in moments the next mini-van will be drawing up with a whole new bunch of friends to enjoy. Even so, they have found a very warm place in our hearts and I know they won't forget us and they definitely won't forget parachute games!

Signing off for the mo. Much, MUCH more to come!

All love,

P.

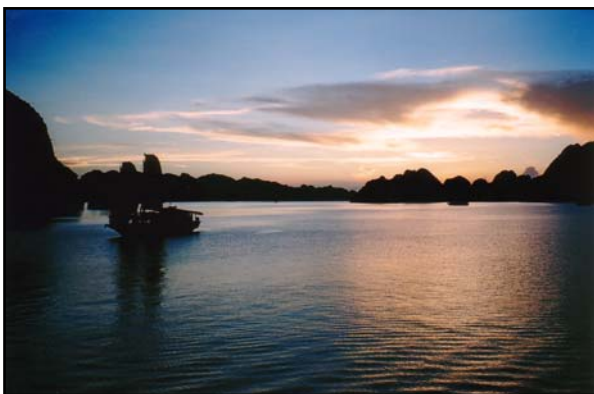
Day 26 Monday 23rd August

Oh my God. Yes I'm back. But guess what,- this may well be the last bit of my travelogue. Okay, okay,- I heard that collective sigh of relief.

My journal got kind of muddled after the last bit as I had run out of paper for a few days until our very kind tour director on the Chinese junk on which we've just spent a number of days, presented me ceremoniously with a brand new journal- gratis. No, he prefers to remain anonymous so you can't send him poison pen letters.

I'm just going to copy it verbatim so good luck with understanding the timing and tenses. But then you're all intelligent people....

Here goes:



were told the yellow ones were the ones to watch out for and fortunately they were not in evidence. We jumped and dived off the sides and top of the junk, our travelling companions, six very friendly Spaniards, proving the much more stylish, but Greg and Adam holding their own (I held my nose).

Anchored off the white sand beach of a small island in Ha Long bay. The sun is setting behind one of the many limestone (karst) islands which rise vertically out of the water. We've just returned from a wonderful swim in 34 degree water from junk to island and back. Lots of big white jellyfish floating here and there but we





Our cabin has an en-suite shower so we've been able to wash off the salt, and (bliss) the air-con and fans are on in the dining area where I'm sitting. We heard about this tour from a couple of Aussies back in Sa Pa a few days ago. Adam had included Ha Long Bay in our original itinerary. It was made a World Heritage Site in 1994 and encompasses 1969 islands, 900 of which are named. Damn, they've switched the TV on and I'm being blasted with a Vietnamese version of TOTP's! How incongruous is that?!

Am now out front on the little deck in front of the wheel house where the 'driver' is steering with his feet, fag in one hand and drink can in the other! I can sit with my feet dangling over the edge watching the water disappear under the deeply undercut prow. The carved wood dragon figurehead provides a convenient leaning post. The engine has stopped and the anchor has just been dropped so it seems we've reached our resting place for the night. The light is fading fast and all is still. Other junks are anchored a little way off and the sounds are of crew calling to one another, conversations in foreign tongues of many nations drifting across the water and the occasional splash as another tourist goes overboard (through choice that is.) I can hear faint chopping from the galley where our dinner is being prepared. A little fisherman's boat has just putt-putted by. Two young lads on the back, pulling in their shrimping net, smile and wave.



We were delivered to Ha Long (Descending Dragon) port at 12.30 after a very comfortable, in fact luxurious, bus ride three and a half hours from Hanoi. Scenery along the way much like some we've seen in China although possibly more palms. Every inch cultivated and lots of new construction going on. The new houses going up are curious in that they have narrow frontage, one room wide, but rise up to three or four floors and go back about four times the length of their frontage. The front downstairs room is invariably a large open shop area (everyone here is a business person in some shape or form). The facades are often painted in bright two tone colours but the sides most often remain grey concrete. Adam says this is because they will eventually build alongside and there is certainly evidence of this.

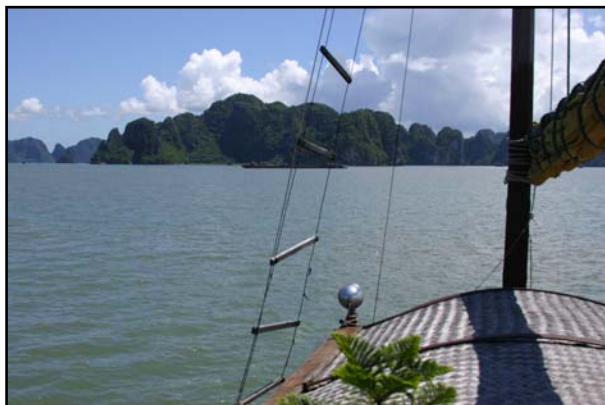
I am interested in the fact that there appear to be no babies in anywhere! There were babies everywhere you looked in China and Sa Pa but though I watched all the way, none were in evidence at all.

Stopped for loo and snacks at a big kind of warehouse building run by a charity for those handicapped (still PC here!) genetically by Agent Orange (defoliant used by the US in the war and still having devastating effects two generations later) In rows, at tapestry tables, sat teenage girls sewing the most exquisite embroidery pictures at incredible speed. I tried to make eye contact with some of them but only managed it with one girl who smiled sweetly and then when I spoke, pointed to her ears and shook her head and went back to her work. I realized they were all completely deaf.

There was much merchandise on display for the tourists ranging from pottery to bamboo lacquered dishes to silk fabrics and jade jewellery. Our guide for the trip, a very sweet young chap by name of Ing, had mentioned that this was the area famous for its 'bean cake.' I duly bought a small box to try on the bus. It was a strange kind of fudge-like sweet with a grainy texture and odd after-taste. Managed to persuade the Spanish to help consume it.



the cars in Hanoi and the row boats to the motor bikes. Fortunately they are somewhat slower and not quite so numerous but there seemed equally little 'road' sense. The rule seems to be just go for it regardless.



are constantly dripping. Next came fresh shrimp with two types of dipping sauce, crispy spring rolls, a large fish with garnish, squid, then mixed vegetables and rice. We finished up with dragon fruit which is a fascinating magenta colour but less impressive taste-wise. Most of you will know of my predilection for seafood... Fortunately there was enough there for me to enjoy however, and Greg, of course, was in his element!

At 3 o'clock we weighed anchor at the island of Sung Sot where we visited 'Amazing Cave.' Ing was very concerned to impress upon us all just how amazed we would be when we got to see 'Amazing Cave.' Naturally enough now everything we do or see is preceded by that particular adjective, i.e. "Let's have an amazing drink before our amazing dinner" (could wear thin mighty quickly) It was a fairly spectacular cave as caves go, but Sugar clearly felt that when you've seen one cave you've seen 'em all. Re-boarded after an hour or so and were presented with more refrigerated wash cloths- wonderful.

We only had a 10 minute wait at the port (fortunately because we could have expired with the heat) before being led to our gang plank and climbing aboard our very beautiful, solid wood junk. The harbour was chock-a-block with junks big and small. Between them, in and out, paddled women in row boats, their wares spread out on their boat prows. Most rowed standing up. Greg likened the junks to



Lunch was served as we set out, white tablecloth and damask napkins! The crew all in whites with epaulettes but mostly bare feet, having kicked off their shoes as soon as the harbour receded. They are friendly enough but only our guide speaks English. We were first served cool, refrigerated wash cloths,- so incredibly thoughtful and appropriate as we





Evening has drawn on and the lights of the other junks are shimmering on the water. 'Amazing' smells waft from the galley. The breeze is balmy and everything too perfectly perfect. Can't see to write any more,- must be time to open a bottle.

To backtrack a little: we arrived in Hanoi station at 6 a.m. after a pretty good night on the sleeper TRAIN from He Kou. Got a taxi to Jordy and Ching's house and were let in by the gardener who had been warned. Found message from

Ching re our rooms and so had lovely cool showers then Adam and Sugar went for a nap while I wrote up my journal. Ching soon emerged and Greg and I had a good chat with her over a good cup of coffee. Jordy was already at work and so she later took us into town to do our necessary errands. She has a driver and he must be the best in Hanoi. He didn't resort to his hooter once and he didn't have a single accident! Hanoi traffic is the worst I've ever seen,- the Chinese are brilliant in comparison and you know what I've had to say about them!

Ching took us to lunch at a very nice restaurant with doorman. We felt decidedly underdressed. The travel agency we needed just happened to be right next door. We arranged our trip out to Ha Long Bay in a very short time and then took a stroll around a beautiful lake in the centre of Hanoi.

Juliet, Jordy and Ching's 10 year old daughter, whom we haven't seen since she was about 6, was home from a water park trip by the time we got back, so we got to catch up with her. She's a sweetie, mature for her age and has the most beautiful dark eyes and dark chestnut hair with deep copper tones. A mesmerising blend of her parents.

Dinner was made by Mr Tuen who is Vietnamese and has the loveliest smile. It was beautifully cooked and delicious. Mrs Lap, the housekeeper, had ironed all our masses of laundry that we'd popped in the washer before leaving for Ha Long. I felt very guilty as we'd not intended her to do that at all. She's really lovely and has been in this house for many years through the Russians and their successors. Now us!!

Back to the junk:

Our dinner menu last evening bears mention:

Fish with shrimp soup,
Shrimp-like creatures 'which aren't really shrimp' (according to Ing)
Shrimp
Shrimp fish cakes
Fish
Fried rice with vegetables
Fresh fruit.

Up early after a really comfortable night. Breakfast of bread and butter, fried egg and banana (thank the Lord no shrimp) Moving on to our 'base camp' on the island of 'Cat Ba.' Ferried from junk almost to shore by a smaller boat and then waded the last 50 meters after being handed down very politely into the calf





After a short time Ing decided it was time to give us our first kayaking lesson. We all claimed to be



one point we all had to stop while he gave us a lengthy list of statistics about the islands,- he'd obviously swotted up and wasn't going to let his knowledge go to waste. Little does he know that Greg and I have the combined memory of a goldfish. The only bit I can remember is that the islands cover an area of 1,553 square kilometres.



asked Ing if we could maybe have a break and swim for a bit. So we made for a little white beach not far away and spent a while just lying back in the warm water. Not a lot of relief from the heat but a good rest. Our 'lunch boat' then hove into view and we kayaked out to it. It was small but had just about enough benches along the sides for us to stretch out on after a lunch of, guess

deep water via a chair. We all have cute little cabins, palm thatched. There are thin mattresses on the wooden slatted floor and mosquito nets. The shower and loo are communal and back onto the kitchen area. Adam and the two Spanish chaps, Juan and Nacho, played football for a while with two of the camp workers but the rest of us collapsed with the heat under a palm shelter.



Olympic champions already but somehow I don't think he altogether believed us as he carried on regardless. We set off in our two man kayaks and paddled around islands for about an hour, Ing pointing out anything he thought we'd like to know along the way. At



It was a relief whenever we pulled along close to an island and kayaked in the shade for a bit. Often shoals of little luminous green fish would suddenly fly a few feet across the water, one after the other, so that it looked almost as though some creature was running across the surface. The whole place is spectacular.

We were all getting pretty hot and tired and

what? -more seafood. I was beginning to feel I might manage to lose some of the weight I'd put on in China! We all fall asleep very easily, the heat, the kayaking and lunch taking its toll. I apparently disgrace myself by snoring - oh God!

We kayaked for another couple of hours and arrived exhausted back at base camp at about 5pm. The very keen Vietnamese soccer player back at base camp was limbering up on the beach as we pulled our kayaks up on the sand. Adam groaned but Juan and Nacho managed to give the guy a ten minute kick-about before collapsing themselves. He must have been waiting for us to get back all day poor guy!



After fresh water showers and a sit in the shade we all felt much better. Talking at lunch, the Spaniards had asked what work we each did back home. Naturally I had to explain about playchutes and they all decided they wanted to play. Greg and Adam couldn't believe I'd actually brought the playchute to Ha Long Bay, but you never know when you're going to meet a bunch of kids (even big ones) do you Sal?!

Dinner was good under the bamboo shelter,- rice, spring rolls, fish cakes, green beans, beef

stir-fry, squid, rice and some French fries with sesame seeds. All this to the tune of an insect that sounded like a heavy duty buzz-saw being turned on and off. The cicadas were a quiet hum in comparison.

It was getting dark but they hadn't forgotten about the playchute so I got it out and we had some fun. We got Ing walking on the water, he was a good sport. Unfortunately we couldn't get any pictures as Greg's camera had died.

We retired to our cabins early and Greg's last words were: "Who'd have thought I'd be grateful to go to sleep on a 1 inch mattress on the floor of a bamboo hut?" We were completely knackered,- a new word for the Spanish which they really seemed to enjoy! Each hut was equipped with a fan and one dim light bulb which worked while the generator was on. We kept the fan on all night until it went off at about 4.30am. On a night trip to the loo I could see bright lights dotted around the bay where single fishermen were night fishing.

Next morning:



Woke to the incessant buzz of the cicadas and a little birdsong and the biggest spider I've ever seen that wasn't a tarantula. Had an early cold shower and now sitting in the dining area. Beside me is the little camp dog. He seems to want to be close but has refused any offer of food and although he sniffs my hand, shies away from any further contact. Greg's just emerged from the shower, scrunching along the coral strewn path. Nacho beat me to the only single kayak and is out paddling on the calm water.

Thought it was the Germans you had to watch out for! Breakfast is to be at 7 and then we get ferried back to the junk for the return journey at 8.30. We're to have lunch in Ha Long Port and then take the coach back to Hanoi for about 5.

Back on the junk:

After breakfast and a photo session with the Spanish we waded out carrying our backpacks to the little boat. It was a distance of about a hundred meters but very shallow and only knee deep at the boat. Discovered when we were all aboard that we were grounded and could not pole her off the bottom until Greg and I moved over to the other side..

Arrived back at the junk and clambered aboard,- it feels like home. We're sitting in the dining area (well, stretched out on the couches) with fans full on and it feels great.

Later:



They buy all they need from other little boats,- rather like the bread delivery van at home I suppose. Most of these fish farms have big dogs on board to guard their precious livelihoods. The dogs are fierce and run along the decks barking at anything that passes.

We see lots of other junks all used for tourism these days but as magnificent as they ever were, reminding one of pirate ships - it's easy to imagine we're on an extended 'Pirates of the Caribbean' trip at Disneyland. Ing has just pointed out the largest floating town. He says it has a population of about 1,000 and a school. The children get ferried to the school from as much as 30 minutes boat trip away. We saw a great article about it in our flight magazine on the way out to China when we never dreamed of seeing it for real. Must try and get a copy.



We're passing many fishermen in tiny covered boats. They either throw nets or use a line in their hands,- no pole. Sometimes there is a young lad doing the rowing for his dad, usually from a standing position. Some fishermen have bigger craft with motors and flat roofs often painted a bright shade of green. Many of the floating houses have big deep cages suspended underneath them where they 'grow' fish for market. The big boat comes around once a week to purchase their fish mostly for China.



Stopped again for swimming. Adam's having a blast and Sugar has joined him for her first swim. Underway again with snacks and fruit served. We've exchanged e-mail addresses etc with the Spanish and Juan and Mar have insisted we give them a call when we're in Barcelona in February. SeamStress has turned 10 years old this year and so we've planned a little celebratory trip to Spain with Sal and Pete.

Later still.

The harbour was mad as ever. Junks berth wherever they can and barge each other out of the way to do so. They 'park' sometimes three deep so that you have to scramble from one to the other to reach shore. All part of the fun but with heavy backpacks and in sweltering heat not hilarious.

It was very sad to leave our new friends and the junk,-it had all been a heck of an adventure and one I'd do again at the drop of a hat. The whole trip cost us \$99 US each! Our tans had improved and even Greg's legs were pink!

Bussed to the 'Royal Hotel' for lunch in a massive dining room in which we were the only clientele so we sat right in front of the air-con and made orgasmic noises. Back to Hanoi, stopping on the way at the same place as on the way out. I bought a small embroidery picture of a fisherman in the bay at twilight for a keepsake. Ing did his last little bit as our guide and got a big round of applause, he was exceedingly professional, flexible and fun.

I'm going to stop here before the dreadful moment when we get back to Jordy's and Adam discovers that his wallet isn't where he thinks he left it and that he must have had it nicked either on the train or in Hanoi. Panic stations.. But that's another story as is the one about the martinet tour guide at the war museum and lots more.

We said our tearful goodbyes to Adam and Sugar as they left by taxi at 4.30 this morning for the train station and the start of their long journey home. We leave this evening and arrive back at Heathrow via Paris at 7.50am on Wednesday. It's been the best holiday ever but I guess it has to come to an end and, despite our pathetic memories, there's an awful lot we'll never forget.

Love to you all and thanks for bearing with me if you got this far. You're troopers, one and all!!

Signing off,

Pen

Greetings from Hanoi where we are currently enjoying the splendidly delightful hospitality of the United Nations Development Programme's Regional Director or, as at least those of you in my immediate family will know, Jordy Ryan. For those of you who don't know, Jordy and I were class mates in high school and at Yale and he was also, in fact, the best man at our wedding. He has been in Hanoi now for a couple of years heading up the UN's development projects in Vietnam (and other parts of Southeast Asia, I think) and he and his delightful and beautiful wife Ching and their charming and talented daughter Juliet have been providing us with home comforts and civilised accommodation.





Hanoi is a zoo - I can't think of any other way to describe it. Like the Chinese towns and cities, it runs full tilt twenty-four hours a day and the traffic is more chaotic than anywhere else we've run across so far and that is saying something. Like the Chinese, they do have lanes painted on their roads which mean little apart from presumably providing some kind of employment to a horde of traffic lane painters; they also travel around roundabouts in any direction they please; traffic lights (of

which there are about four or five in the city) are there merely for decoration (a red light means that one simply has to slow down somewhat before proceeding through the intersection) and, apparently, there is a motorcycle for every third person in Hanoi (and let



me tell you, there are a lot of people in Hanoi). Crossing the road on foot is an adventure and apparently the strategy to adopt is to simply start walking across the road looking neither left nor right and whatever else, don't stop. The motorcycles then whiz by you on either side



leaving you standing and unscathed, or at least that's been our experience so far. Jordy also suggests waving your arms about as well which is either to provide a more visual presence to the motorcyclists or to ward off evil spirits - I haven't decided which yet.

Sa Pa, as I wrote last time, was a paradise and we were sorry to have to leave it behind particularly as we were headed for the 'sleeper' train from Lao Cai to Hanoi. We made the trip down the mountain with no

mishaps although, as we arrived at the train station, the heavens opened again and we got suitably drenched as we found our way to our train. Regrettably, it was suffering some sort of nervous breakdown and had no power so, of course, no lights nor any air conditioning and it was sweltering as we clambered aboard and found our way to our compartment. We sat for about an hour before the power came on and finally made our departure about an hour and a half late. Despite all that, however, this was indeed a sleeper train worthy of the description - no foul smells other than those which we generated on our own and surprisingly clean bed linen. Once the power was restored the air conditioning came on and although Pen was

seemingly unable to sleep, the rest of us snored our way through the eight hour journey to Hanoi, arriving about 5.45 in the morning.

We stayed one night with Ching and Juliet (Jordy was off at a meeting in Hai Phong) and then set out for Ha Long Bay for a couple of days. Ha Long Bay is a World Heritage site and is spectacularly beautiful (look it up on Google). Limestone islands rise out of the water in a landscape which is very similar to that around Yangshou. We boarded a Chinese junk with six other travellers (a group of young Spaniards from Barcelona who were very friendly and delightful company) and set off through the islands. Again, I can't think how to describe it except to say that it was stunning. The junk stopped at various intervals and we were able to dive from the top and swim in bath temperature water whenever we weren't eating. The food, from my perspective, was fantastic - fresh shrimp, squid, fish and, on one occasion, something "which looks like shrimp but isn't shrimp" as our guide described it. It was about the size of a crayfish and was very tasty indeed. As some of you will know, however, Ms Playchute is not a great fan of sea food so she was on starvation rations for much of the time although there were generally enough vegetables and, of course, mountains of rice to help her keep body and soul together.

What inhabitants there are in the bay live on floating houses where they raise fish - they have a series of floating docks which are netted where they effectively farm the fish. We would occasionally come across whole "villages" in the bay and apparently the largest village has a school where the youngsters come from all over the bay until they are about ten or eleven or so. We also ran across various individuals fishing in the bay; sometimes whole families who clearly live entirely on these small, relatively open boats and spend their time floating around the bay (and it's a considerable size, let me say), fishing and approaching the junks to sell their catch.



We stayed the first night on the junk and the accommodation was five star - we had very comfortable beds in our cabins with en-suite facilities which included our own shower and toilet and after the exertions of diving, swimming and eating, we all slept like proverbial logs.

The second day we transferred to a smaller boat to be transported to our "base camp" on a



private island in the bay where we were to go kayaking for the day. The camp was fun - bamboo huts and fairly basic facilities but by this time we were having great fun with the Spanish youngsters. Our guide gave us all a rudimentary course in Kayaking 101 and we set off paddling around the rocks and islands. The weather was glorious - bright blue skies, swelteringly hot still but, of course, we were on the water so it wasn't bad - and the sea was like a mill pond, perfect for leisurely kayaking through some absolutely glorious natural scenery. We

owe brother Steph a huge 'thank you' for letting us borrow his kayaks at the lake over the past two summers and enabling us to hone our skills and, for my colleague Steph, who is a keen water sportswoman - you have got to come and do this sometime; it was fabulous. I never imagined in my wildest dreams that, at the close of day, I would look forward to retiring in a bamboo hut on a one inch mattress but the whole trip was utterly fantastic and, after kayaking for about six hours we were, understandably, absolutely knackered.



The following morning we waded out to the small boat to be transferred to the junk and then back to the harbour and ultimately back to Hanoi. Certainly one of the many, many highlights of the trip.

Jordy, Ching and Juliet now have to endure our annoying presence for the next couple of days before we fly back on Tuesday night. Gird your loins to endure the five-hour slide show which undoubtedly will be presented to any and all guests who should venture near over the next few months.

Love to you all,

Greg & Penny

Home again:

Sunday August 29th

Back home!

Am just about over the jet lag and am up early so have decided to finish my journal then Greg can attach the pictures so that you can all get a better idea of what I've been on about for so many weeks.

The last 'chapter' finds us arriving back in Hanoi from Ha Long Bay:

Day 23 Friday 20th August

Taxied back to Jordy and Ching's from the town. Big panic when we arrived as Adam's wallet wasn't where he thought it was. He had realised on the bus going to Ha Long Bay that he didn't have it on him but figured he'd left it in his bedroom. Thinking back at this juncture he isn't at all sure when he last had it. We figure he could have left it on the train or, more likely, had it swiped in the morning crush at the train station. This is not uncommon and he has kept reminding us throughout the trip to keep an eye on our own. Poor lad, he's understandably very upset as he had about \$350 and, much worse, his Bank of China card which is access to all his savings and he's been saving hard all year. Of course we can make good the immediate money loss but the card has been gone for 4 days now.

As soon as Ching got home she helped him try to phone the bank but no joy there. They eventually got on the internet and managed to cancel the card. Both Jordy and Ching tried to reassure him that without a pin number no one could use the card and anyway it is only useable

in China. He seemed to feel calmer but there is still the niggle in all our minds that we are not far from the border and people on the black market can be very clever. Will just have to keep toes and fingers crossed. Do not need scares like this but I guess it happens to most of us at some time or other.

We had another great meal prepared by Mr Tu En, - joy of joys it wasn't sea food of any variety but a lovely fresh salad and then spare ribs followed by cheesecake and then a wonderful cheese board. Cheese is not a big item in the peoples' diet here and we have only managed to find that very mild goats cheese in Lijiang and the strange, fatty grilled goats cheese on sticks in Da Li. This was fabulous! Desserts have been absent too apart from fresh fruit, mostly watermelon or dragon fruit (not what we call dessert eh Sue?!) I have promised to send Mr Tu En a dessert cook book as soon as I get home as he wants to expand his repertoire.

Woke to the sounds of a strident voice through a loud speaker. It was coming from the little park area between roads already teeming with honking traffic. I thought it was perhaps telling the news or it was the Tai Chi instructor leading a class. Must try to get out there and join in one morning. They use red fans in the class so it looks rather elegant. Ching says her mum has now advanced from fan to sword, - but only the plastic one so far! (Later Jordy told me it was the Saturday morning party instruction, suggesting what you ought to be doing and thinking. Wish someone would tell me each morning what I ought to be doing and thinking - would make life a lot easier.....!)

Greg is busy with his camera and the computer. His camera decided to die in Ha Long Bay. He thinks it might have been the humidity so he's taking all the pictures he's got on the present micro-card (hundreds) off onto disk before re-somethinging it. I'm so technical!! Hope to God it works or we'll lose all of Li Jiang to Ha Long.

Have succeeded in finding filter coffee in the cupboard and making a pot and have had the best cup of coffee in ages here in the very palatial kitchen. The cat is mewling outside for breakfast or to be let in but I can't do either because of the security system. If I try opening a door I fear I'd have the whole household up and the police here (eventually). This house is old French style colonial, built about 1920. It has enormous rooms and high, high ceilings of about 13/14 feet with fans. The rooms all lead off a big central marble tiled area. The upstairs is set out in a similar way and Juliet tells me they have played badminton in the hallway it's so big! Jordy and Ching have lots of beautiful old Chinese and Vietnamese porcelain and antique furniture. It is all very elegant.

Day 24 Saturday 21st August

Jordy is frying up bacon and sausages, mmmmmmm!

Spent part of the morning racing to find an open bank to get Adam more dollars before they closed, its being Saturday. He and Sugar booked their journey back to Guilin yesterday (or so we thought).

Jordy took the day out to escort us to a war museum where we had the most 'educational' and amusing tour given by a rather fierce lady who dubbed Jordy 'Mr U.N.' and sometimes 'Mr America,' Greg, 'Mr U.K.' and an Aussie who



happened to join us, 'Mr Australia.' She popped up shortly after we entered and without much ado began to lead us around ('march' is probably a more appropriate description). She would lecture us about a particular photo/artefact, her demeanour demanding our unmitigated attention) and then say "And now I have a question for you," and would all but poke the chosen interogatee with her folded broly! One felt somewhat under pressure to come up with the goods. She was very knowledgeable and interesting although with a somewhat biased perspective! Her accent caused one to have to listen very carefully and this was no leisurely stroll. We were marched from room to room, up and down stairs.



The museum had quite a display with tanks and large artillery and even a MIG outside. It provided information about a variety of conflicts beginning before the 10th Century, 1000 years of Chinese domination – even the Mongolians had swept down upon Vietnam. The French arrived around 1860, landing in the south and gradually moving northwards. They established a very tough colonial regime. The Japanese occupied the country in '43 (the French fled) and took all the rice and other produce thus causing famine. August '45 brought a revolt against the Japanese, driving them out. At this juncture there was an opportunity not to have the French come back but the US gave them the go ahead.

The defeat of the French came in '54 with the 'Spring Offensive' when General Giap, a former teacher and now chief strategist under Ho Chi Min, completely reversed previous Vietnamese tactics and consequently rid Vietnam of the French. Part of his tactics involved thousands of Vietnamese carrying food and supplies on bicycles to forest hideouts. They would carry up to 350 kg's on a single bicycle!! There was a good model in the museum of the underground tunnels they dug and lived in. They even had underground hospitals. My knowledge of the history of Vietnam, apart from the US intervention of 35 or so years ago, was minimal. I am still confused about a number of things and must read more, (or perhaps take another tour with our martinet tour guide).

Towards the end of her tour, our 'instructress' took us outside to climb the Citadel, a 1,000 year old fortress tower in the grounds of the museum. She suddenly ushered us rather surreptitiously aside into a darkened stairway and proposed to 'share a secret with us.' She produced a small paper packet from her pocket and began to reassure us in a hushed voice that we did not have to buy if we didn't want to, but if we had enjoyed her tour then perhaps we would,- but it was a big secret just between ourselves... Out of the packet came some little badges, copies of the Dien Bien Phu victory medal. From strict school marm with flashing eye to surreptitious Fagin-type operative in a matter of seconds was a little disconcerting but then, just like China, this country is full of such incongruities to the Western mind.

We duly paid up and collected our badges,- don't think we dared not to. Her tour was well worth the \$1.00 each.

Back to the house where I managed to key in my journal up to the end of Sa Pa. Jordy and Ching are extremely generous about use of the computer and assure me they are not in need of it,- I hope that's the truth!

Out to a great Indian restaurant in the evening where we had a truly terrific meal. Ching and I talked 'business'. She has set up a school shop at the International School where Juliet is a pupil. It supplies all sorts of useful school items with the school logo and has been a big success making a considerable profit for the school. She has various other enterprising ideas and would make an extremely competent and successful business operative. She works at the school in an organisational capacity. They are moving to a newly built campus this year but are facing problems in the immediate future as the new school is far from completed. Ching says she's just waiting to hear what Plans B and C are. I reckon even if they get to Plan Z, she'll deal with it with her natural efficiency and aplomb.



I should mention something about Hanoi. It is a very busy, very noisy city,- Greg is best at describing the traffic and has taken many photos of the masses of bicycles, motorbikes, taxis, cyclos etc. The city has many beautiful wide boulevards, tree-lined and very French. Much of the architecture is from the French Colonial period (I am reminded here of 'The Life of Brian' and 'What did the Romans ever do for us?'...!) We've seen various statues of Lenin and Ho Chi Min (Uncle Ho). In the little

park across the road is a bust of the inspirational Cuban writer/poet Jose Marti, unveiled by Fidel last March.

Nearly forgot to mention, after our Indian meal Ching suggested we go and get ice creams for dessert. There is a place in Hanoi she had pointed out during the day, where they sell a particular kind of soy-based ice cream which has proved popular with local tastes. Popular is not the word! It seemed the majority of the Hanoi populace was out in force to buy ice cream. The street was chock-a-block with young people and motor bikes and there was a guy with a loud hailer either trying to organise the ice cream queue or else the traffic, I'm not at all sure which. We fought our way to the front and then retreated licking our fast melting ices. They were a very pale green colour and tasted fine but had a somewhat grainy texture. Much better than the 'green bean' ice lolly I had in Long Ji. (gosh that seems an age ago!)



Day 25 Sunday August 22

Jordy is busy making us waffles today. Adam has emerged. He and Sugar plan to revisit the Vietnamese Airline offices this morning as their tickets on the train (all secured and paid for we thought) did not materialise. He and Jordy have been talking through the various possibilities of trains, planes and automobiles to get them home.

Tonight Greg and I are invited to a dinner given by Ching and Jordy for the Swiss Ambassador, Thomas Ferrari, who is leaving Hanoi to take up a post back in Berne. The Canadian Ambassador and his wife will be there too. What on earth are we going to wear?!

Took us a while to get going but went to a very pleasant restaurant for lunch where we had great sandwiches on foccacia. We then visited the Temple of Literature, a rather beautiful place with extensive gardens and pools. There were many giant 'tablets' of stone called stellae on which were carved the names of the various great scholars and doctors of learning through the ages who attended the temple.

Next a delightful swim at the UN pool in 35 degree water, Juliet practising her diving to the bottom and picking up items skills! We just lazed and enjoyed not dripping with sweat for an hour or so.

Jordy kindly lent Greg a pair of his long trousers and shoes and socks for our meal at the Sofitel Hotel. He looked passable although Jordy is somewhat shorter than Greg. I wore a new Chinese top and skirt thing I'd purchased in Da Li. The Chinese meal Ching had organised was something else! I have kept the menu and still marvel at the number of courses we consumed and how delicious they were. We had six starters!! Then there were four courses before the three desserts! No we didn't go for ice cream afterwards. The ambassadors were fun to listen to and very gracious to us, enjoying our stories of sleeper buses and the like! (I guess being diplomats they were used to having to listen to boring old farts telling stories). The Canadian ambassador and his wife were shortly to set off on a trip to Li Jiang and environs so we were able to give them a few tips.

Day 26 Monday 23rd August

Walked to town with Adam and Sugar. They had secured train tickets up to the border and will have to take pot-luck from there. This is their last day as they catch the 5.15 in the morning. Can't quite believe it's all coming to an end but we're trying to ignore the fact. Breakfast of croissants and latte at a



and I took separate seats feeling it was hardly fair to expect some poor guy to convey our great bulks in one. An adam and a sugar make up about 1 greg! (new scale of measurement).



café by the lake. Adam suggested we do as they had the evening before, and take a cyclo ride for an hour around the old town. Cyclos are the conveyances which carry you in front in a comfortable 'chair' your driver peddling behind. Not quite so bad as the sam-pans in Long Ji and on the flat, so we hailed a little group and Adam and Sugar travelled together in one while Greg

Interestingly the shopkeepers of Hanoi (and probably over the whole of Asia) like to run their businesses in close juxtaposition to like businesses. Where we in the West would want to find a special niche for a particular type of shop, as far as possible from the competition, they do the exact opposite. As a result you have



whole streets selling the same goods. They get known as 'Silk Street' or 'Bamboo and Ladder Street,' etc. Imagine how much easier this makes life for the consumer. So on our ride we discovered 'Sellotape and Cigarette Street,' 'Air filter Street,' 'Pots and Pans Street,' 'Medicine Street' and many more.

When I asked about this curious approach to business Ching explained that it works for both shop keeper and consumer in that if you want to purchase a particular item from a shop and they perhaps don't have exactly the size or quantity or whatever of what you require, then the shop keeper will just nip next door and purchase it a bit cheaper from his compatriot and charge you enough so that he makes a little bit for his trouble. Thus the world of business turns. I guess when Guilds were a part of everyday life back in Medieval times our shops operated in a similar way.

We were still looking for the red dress for Anya. Have I mentioned this before? Sal had asked me to find her a red Chinese style dress and I had failed whilst in China so this was our last chance. I did in fact find just the thing although it was of Vietnamese style with big slits up the side necessitating the wearing of a pair of long, silky pants underneath. Just keeping my fingers crossed it fits. We also went to luggage street to buy another bag for all the goodies we've collected on our trip.



We had a good day just mooching and returned to the house at 5 for our previously arranged massages. Jordy and Ching have the masseuse come to their house every Sunday and had thought we ought to try her out. She was utterly brilliant! Gave us an hour's massage each from which we emerged feeling wonderfully relaxed. 'She' was the sweetest young lady, no taller than Sugar but with enormous strength and endurance. She had trained under a doctor for four years and was absolutely brilliant. I tried to persuade her that she would do exceedingly well in Britain and Greg proposed marriage, but it seems she has a



husband and couldn't be budged...

We wanted to take Jordy, Ching and Juliet out for dinner to say thank you in some small way for all their kindness. They chose the 'Emperor' restaurant only a short walk from home. It was the most beautiful building,- an old mandarin's home which had been brought from its former resting place to Hanoi. It was two floors of beautiful wood panelling, a very gracious place. Unfortunately we were met at the door by a very polite young lady who pointed out the house rule which required men to wear long trousers. Oops! After a little discrete conversation she agreed to let us in and we were led upstairs to where Adam and Greg would not be too conspicuous. We did spot a few other clients sporting shorts during the evening so I guess the rule is really rather lax.

We had another great meal starting with some interesting tiny rice pancakes with shrimp. I really can't remember all the rest, forgot to write it down, but it was good.

I think I have managed not to go on and on too much about the heat in Hanoi but believe it bears mention as one is constantly aware of it. Walking into an air-conditioned building or driving in Ching's air-con car was absolute bliss. Whenever we emerged from said car our glasses would fog up completely with the humidity. And we'd be dripping within a matter of seconds.

Day 27 :Tuesday 24th August

Adam and Sugar left at 4.30 this morning. He and Sugar had said their goodbyes to Jordy and Ching the previous evening and Ching had arranged for a taxi to come round to the side gate at 4.30. We all set our alarms and got them, bags and all, out the gate for 4.25. We waited but nothing came. Greg took a stroll up to the corner to check the driver hadn't come to the wrong gate. No car, but he did get propositioned twice by young ladies on motor bikes. He told them \$3.00 was much too much.....

Still nothing so Adam took a stroll to the corner and found the taxi waiting, lights off and driver practically asleep. We are not sure whether Greg just didn't see him or he'd just arrived. Any way, it was a relief and we bundled Adam and Sugar into the car after some very tearful hugs and kisses. They had given us such a fantastically wonderful holiday, none of us wanted it to end and saying goodbye is always so hard.

Later in the morning Ching's driver dropped us at the Ho Chi Min mausoleum as I had a somewhat gruesome urge to see Uncle Ho's mortal remains. Sadly he had closed for business at 10a.m. so we were too late. We did get to walk around his beautiful gardens however, and see his little 'stilt' house where he spent most of his time writing and meeting people. There is also a big and beautiful palace in the grounds where I guess he dealt with the larger parties! Greg found a 'Good Morning Vietnam' T shirt to fit him and we both bought red T shirts with the yellow Vietnamese star emblazoned in the middle. Think it'll be great gym wear and big enough to hide my new paunch until I can lose it.





Lunch with Ching and Juliet at a café specialising in a special fish dish over charcoal. Many of the cafes specialise in just one dish and seem to do good business. Back to the house where we packed and spent our last evening looking at their Mongolian holiday photos. Now there's a place I'd like to go..... Mr Tu En fixed another lovely meal ending with crème caramel. We took his and Mrs Lap's photo but sadly find that we have not captured his beautiful smile. Will have to ask Jordy and Ching to take another for us.

The time came and we said our goodbyes again. They were such great hosts and lovely friends, we feel very fortunate to have spent time with them.

Off to the airport, an hour's distance, with Ching's driver Mr Huan. Had a nice chat with him on the way although his English isn't great. He lives with his wife and parents whom he takes care of, and has always lived in Hanoi. I got the impression he'd never been anywhere else. He seems to love his job and said he learned to drive in the army. We congratulated him on being probably the best driver in the whole of Hanoi but he said he is always worried in case of accidents, - not very surprising.



Hanoi airport was the biggest zoo. There were no divisions into queues until just a few feet before the desks and so everyone was in one big crush and let me tell you,- the Vietnamese do not know how to queue. It was most frustrating and, if we hadn't become as bad as them in shouldering and elbowing forward whenever an inch or two of space became available, we might still be there. Next came the airport tax desk where an orderly queue,- most satisfactory to the British mind set, was formed. Unfortunately this did not preclude some Vietnamese passengers

from marching up to the desk at an oblique angle and thrusting their money and forms directly under the nose of the attendant and directly in front of the waiting passenger. Amazingly these payments were always accepted, annoying us Europeans to the point of unadulterated indignation and fury!

We finally made it through security and found the departure lounge where there just happened to be a great big TV and what was on? The Olympics! It was a water polo match but the first bit we'd seen so we sat glued.

The flight was uneventful and we both slept better than we could have hoped. None of the videos worked except for one in Vietnamese. We knew we had a tight transfer in Paris and ran as much of the way as we could but we were late in and didn't make it. This meant about two hours wait for the next plane that could take us so, after phoning Nick, we slobbered out in the lounge, eating muffins and reading.

Nick met us at Heathrow (bless him) and we got home around mid-day. The place was beautifully clean and tidy thanks to my mum (and my dad for doing the hoovering!) and the dogs were very pleased to see us. Michael and Sal and Jacob (Jeremy's youngest) were there too and I don't think I stopped talking for three hours straight. All enjoyed their little gifts, well they said they did, and admired the 'damn' hat. Just as I thought it would, it looks great in the hallway. So there!

We've had such tremendous fun and so many terrific experiences and seen so many fantastic places and eaten so much..... (well, just eaten SO much!) We listed all the different modes of transport we've used on our trip,- fourteen in all!:

Plane

Train (hard seat,-very)

Train (soft sleeper)

Bus (sleeper- you've got to be joking!)

Local bus

Mini van

Taxi

Car

Motorbike

Bike

Junk

Kayak

Bamboo raft

Cyclo

So that's it, there isn't any more. Thanks for staying with us. We hope you all had a great summer despite the dreadful weather in Britain which we haven't stopped hearing about since we arrived home! Perhaps there's an Indian summer around the corner. If so, you'll probably feel there's no justice. I can hear Stuart right now - "You lucky, lucky bastards."

Love to you all,

Penny

