SOJOURN TO THE SOUTH CHINA SEA

## Sunday January 17 to Sunday January 31, 2016

# EVENTS LEADING UP TO OUR JANUARY 2016 EXCURSION TO SOUTH EAST ASIA.

It was May when I initiated the process of determining a destination for our next fall’s trip. My first step was to list four trips to be considered. By August we had come to no conclusion and time was running out so I stepped in and made the decision for us. I had an inspiration probably precipitated by the pleasures of August pool sitting; Central America and the Panama Canal. Of course It was so late by then that choice of accommodations was limited and we had to settle with a verandah-free cabin with assurances that we would most assuredly be given the preferred verandah suite. by Mid November and after many telephone calls and no success, I knew that there was no way I was going to the tropics in January with a totally insulated room. I was also well aware of what my reaction would be if that situation prevailed: so I pulled the plug.

And boy, did I ever pay for that one. This was a good lesson for why you don’t cancel a reservation. I had only barely missed the deadline for the minimal forfeiture and ended up losing ¾ of the fee, and I can assure you that amounted to a substantial amount of money. That was truly Bad News but life is short and of the essence especially when you have obtained an advanced age. So be it.

So by now it’s REALLY TRULY VERY LATE IN THE SEASON and NO trip.

Next possible choice: Roger’s original preferred selection which was Southeast Asia. When asked why he would prefer this trip his answer was: we haven’t been there and it’s different. True, we haven’t been there, but that’s true of a lot of places I wouldn’t want to go to anyway, and different, that’s for sure: No argument there. It’s different all right. I suspected he simply had no memories of the area therefore had no idea of what he was getting in to. But, no problem, I remembered an idea which had been perking in my brain: I’ll go anywhere as long as it’s Seabourn. And, of course it was.

I find it very interesting – a dichotomy actually. it seems the reason we travel is because of me; the reason we go to strange, unusual weird places is because of Roger. I suppose that’s a benefit. If it were up to me we’d probably still be going to England. The most interesting part of this is how much of a contrast this is to his daily routines.

I was not totally committed to the idea of this trip. I actually had serious doubts: I can’t imagine anyone wanting to go to Cambodia. The last I heard it was a hell hole. I dredged up all the words and names I could recall associated with the area: Vietnam, Phnom Pen, Da Nang, Khymer Rouge, Killing Fields, Pol Pot. WHOA – this sure doesn’t sound good. These names give me the shivers. All, of course, resonate in my mind due to their role in an event of recent history which some few of us tried very hard to pretend didn’t exist. And here it is again; come back to haunt me.

That being said, but then again, maybe that’s NOT where we’re going. Other than Angkor Wat what else could you plausibly be going there for? What have we got ourselves in to? I can’t say anything – I said it didn’t matter where we went as long as it is Seabourne, but this may be stretching it a bit. So I compromised by spending the next two months stewing and fretting,

Doesn’t matter: I’ll probably be dead before I get there – a 24 hour flight in tourist? Ho!

All I can say is, I’m certainly getting my money’s worth out of this and we haven’t even left the house.

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THE PERIOD PURSUANT TO THE JOURNEY -November - January

It is high time at this point to introduce the major player in this epic recitation; the Seabourn cruise line, how we came to travel with them, and how they have come to play such an important role in my life.

Prior to this time our mode of travel had been with Viking River Cruises which yes, specializes in river cruises. Eventually the time came when we had essentially exhausted their entire desirable and/or practical repertoire and were approaching a time of decision.

Just by happenstance and coincidentally what should appear on our kitchen counter but a very tantalizing sales brochure outlining a sizeable collection of very desirable travel destinations, ones we were very much interested in visiting such as Rome and the islands of the Mediterranean. Perfecto!

Interestingly enough, that was exactly how we encountered Viking. This is a very good example of the efficacy of massive, continuous and repetitive brochure mailings on their part, even though it drives me nuts with its waste. If one of them just happened to actually be in the right spot at the right time they have potentially landed what could be a lucrative account. We were certainly a ripe target for that variety of happenstance. And thus, our introduction to the world of SEABOURN, as well as to the world of the ocean going cruise. This has assuredly been well worth their combined efforts.

Several happy years later we have arrived at this junction. But, how come Southeast Asia?

Of course, now that I think about it I am remembering just that. I was sitting on the ship when I was inspired to declare, that’s as simple as it was, a desire to go on this particular trip. That reaction was precipitated by an accidental glimpse of their current brochure and I saw by chance that my favorite ship “Pride” was going to, you guessed it, Southeast Asia.

(I loved “Pride”. She was our introduction to the delectable and desirable attributes of the small ship: intimacy and personal connection. How could you not love this? I have a picture of her and her sister ship “Spirit” pasted on my powder room wall . They have unfortunately been sold and are now being called “yachts” – what an insult. I suppose that’s what happens to these very small 200 passenger-sized ships when their owners want to upgrade for more luxury requiring more ship to afford adequate space. They’re sent to the ship equivalent of pasture or the minor leagues. This is, in effect and in my humble opinion, one step down for me and for them as well. . This is, in effect in my humble opinion, one step down for me and for them as well. They have been downgraded from a MIGHTY ocean liner, to a subservient “large, so what if it’s large, yacht . This is just another example of how our living standards are going – more is more. And I’ve lost the pleasure of an optimum intimate and modest small ship environment. But you can’t stop “progress”.

Anyway - a vision flashed before my eyes: that of Ankor Wat and a cluster of eminently appealing islands purportedly off the coast of Vietnam, and I was impressed. Whatever this flash of inspiration was, it certainly didn’t involve much thought; It was admittedly more likely the martinis. (Boy this “on the house” booze agenda of Seabourns I think is super smart marketing. Offering free booze makes for happy and future passengers: Cheap investment.

I must mention here; with this instantaneous flash of inspiration came also a vague awareness of the considerable amount of time spent at sea. There is a very good chance that this could in fact be an issue. Unfortunately that little consideration got lost in translation along the way and was to be disregarded. And it did prove to be an issue as the weather became rather undesirable which precluded any pool-side or in fact outdoor activity.

ON THE PLUS SIDE: January is a great time to escape. After the Xmas buildup has evaporated leaving me bereft and uncommitted: It’s just as easy to not even bother to get up in the morning. Now that I’m retired It takes a considerable effort – takes a kick in the pants to get back in the saddle – back to all that “busy work” that I have contrived to keep me occupied in lieu of the Library. No energy, nothing needs doing, etc: This is a perfect time to go on a trip

What a happy relief… I have discovered the fact that the passenger number is a mere 400 instead of the 700 I was expecting: apparently they get that ship in 2016. I am thankful. You see, I visualize that they are slowly oozing up in size and consequently down in quality; just like a lot of packaging in the grocery store which although looking the same in fact contains less but at the same price. This is such a minimal amount of difference that one could possibly be expected not to notice. Like the cereal boxes with less cereal; Less value and no way around it. I don’t want to even contemplate such a thing.

I am thankful we’re not going to Korea: I really have no interest in being confronted by KIMCHI. Wikipedia says the Koreans eat so much of this super-spicy condiment that natives when asked to say “cheese” for a photo shot, say “kimchi”. I thought that was a hoot!

The list of side excursions has been posted and at first glance I’m impressed by the number which are rated as one person in difficulty. Could it be that Seabourn has seen the light or is perhaps even having a particularly advanced approach regarding the older population with its physical limitations? Or is it that there are just no stops worthy of long hikes or lengthy descriptions?

One very large bonus = WE HAVE ELECTED TO FLY BUSINESS CLASS !!! . I’m very relieved that we have made this decision. I was seriously assuming the trip would kill me, but at least now I can die happy. The decision has certainly had the effect of easing the negative vibes inspired by thoughts of the destination.

Ahhhh Business Class: one meal after another preceded by one cocktail hour after another. BLISS. It seems each time you fly into a new time zone you get another round of food, and naturally another round of cocktails. This is my idea of flying.

My initial reaction to this happy decision came also with the first laugh of happiness: peals of laughter over how we could possibly raise the money. We’ll have to sell everything in order to afford it. How about selling my Volvo? That’s nice but its probably only worth $1. Add to that the Mercedes, which to me amounts to no loss anyway, and maybe we’d have $2. How about my rings: I don’t wear them anyway.

I do feel better going business… but, we cannot go BritAir. Of course not: I don’t like the seats. What better reason? Can you imagine having the nerve to be this picky? Complaining about seats when I’m basically in the lap of luxury? I should have taken a picture. You’ve got to see them to believe me. I sure hope I never encounter them againThey were like pink plastic cigar tubes. . (I must interrupt here and say that this was our first experience, our first dip, in to the euphoric world of business class.) BUT – to put a positive angle to the story: when we were ushered to our seats in the plane the flight attendant quickly appeared and asked what we wanted to drink…boy did that befuddle me – and, could this be in lieu of cocktails - we’re usually last for cocktails and here we were still on land… It’s obviously way too premature for cocktails. And I was worried too. No messing with my martinis – traveling is the only time I permit myself to indulge.… I’m sure he wasn’t happy about my immediate and horrified reaction to the seat and the drink but he was a good public servant and simply handed me a GLASS OF CHAMPAGNE. No way!! (I’ve since discovered this is the usual seating routine for business class – the other being they grab it right back for takeoff- I have yet to assimilate this bit of trivia so I’m always shocked.- later on, on Air Nippon I was handed the drink as well as a massive menu for my perusal and consequently enjoyment; so I was happily arranging myself, ….taking my time to enjoy the effect before I took a sip and dug what was being offered for my indulgence and – whoosh…that was the end of the drink and that fortuitous scenario.

The very elation this decision inspired in me also presented to me a sea of luscious imaginings and lots of laughter.…at this point it was about the BritAir seats and how really picky I thought I was being. How DO we guarantee seat satisfaction? Is there a website with pictures of busclass seats? Some way we can do some “window shopping”? Possibly yes, but I think you are stuck with what goes where when you want it to.

And how about menus? And we can skip the champagne – I can’t believe this.… I’ve come a long way baby – I am only kidding. No, I am laughing so hard I’m falling out of my chair. Poor George! (I suppose this comment was precipitated by all the splendidly outrageous plan possibilities which flooded my very active imagination George being our Seabourn Trip contact and the one who would have to deal with all this fallout. . (this was especially wonderful when I hatched the idea of establishing residency in this “heaven” I had discovered, only to discover upon asking, that “cats are not welcome”. Haha!

I was laughing here again about the “picky” element. Rj was caviling about me ordering two desserts at dinner one evening and I laughingly chided him : “now that we’re going business class I obviously think I’ve moved up a couple of notches of privilege therefore I certainly am qualified to have as many desserts as I want. Yes?

All this laughing assuredly makes the price well worth it.

A big battle ensued over paying an extra $3000 for BusClass on one segment of our return trip… My argument was it saved us from two extra stops on an already over extended flight - Vancouver and Toronto - as well as an extra day (half a day not counting the three hours in the airport) in Hong Kong which I knew we would just waste. This is undeniably an extra day added to an already too long trip. I’m worried about the kitties (our at home pets).

.And STILL I FRETTED AND I FUSSED: AND I WORRIED – AND INTROSPECTED AND IMAGINED AND I FUSSED SOME MORE: SO HERE IT ALL (the fretting) IS IN A NUTSHELL…..: no, at this point, its become an apologia as follows:

I realized and eventually came to the conclusion that all this negative reaction is a logical response to the amount of proliferation and profusion of photographic coverage on TV and other media which was available and projected at that time in effect producing and creating a highly visible visual record of the horror and violence in existence and Illustrating the atrocities of the war in Vietnam, Cambodia. as well as the violence throughout the area. All of that lives vividly in my memory. Over the years this impression has of course been further tempered by movies and literature, both fiction as well as nonfiction.

It occurred to me that for some people this might be a pilgrimage- Vietnam war vets returning – They’d be our age?

I couldn’t help reverting back to the past and the nightmares I have been left with over previous “potty” arrrangements. I thought these were long in the past but a glance at the side tour descriptions and there it is….the Mekong Delta which I truly was interested in visiting BUT, when they deem it necessary to inform us of the likely inadequacy of the toilet facilities you KNOW IT MUST BE BAD! I’m going to have to think hard about this – it may have to be a deciding factor. I’m getting too old for all the gymnastics that situation tends to entail.

The subject of Cambodia and Angkor Wat: Apparently a seriously extensive and dangerous effort has been made to remove the acres of land mines sunk in the swamps surrounding Angkor Wat – and I’d say presumably all over the country. Hopefully they’ve gotten them all. We may have to think hard about Angkor Wat –. But, it’s rated as a “three person “ trip- the most strenuous rating there is. I’m hoping this rating was assigned due to the fact that it’s a 48 hour “off ship” excursion - and maybe you’re expected to thread your way through the land mines? I’m only kidding. However, I find it difficult to conceive of going that far and not seeing what is probably the most impressive ANCIENT WORLD HERITAGE SIGHT. Maybe we can trade it with Pnom Pen or Da Nang –although I think one of them is included in this trip. And boy, am I skeptical about those two- I was only joking when I suggested them for a visit. Another alluring sounding sight they’ve got in Cambodia are the “killing fields”. How’s that sound for a tourist destination? Pair that with the potties and I most assuredly will stay on the ship.

At my biweekly “neighbors” tea we have occasionally seen fit to confront the subject of relative environmental safety in the form of tsunamis, earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, tornadoes with the major outcome being that we rejoice in living in an area which is relatively free of such exigencies. All of these however are actually present in Southeast Asia – how exciting. This situation elicited the question as to why we were going there. Since then the world has experienced the terrorist shootout in Paris which did add an extra dimension to this conversation. We came to the conclusion that tsunamis and the ilk are nothing compared to terrorists. – actually we decided we may be going to a relatively safe place: better tsunamis than terrorists. That’s true? No, maybe not.

I have reached a definitive conclusion involving not only how I travel but perhaps why I travel as **well. First of all: I’ll go anywhere as long as it’s Seabourn. And second are the martinis. I only get** martinis when I travel – surely a supremely persuasive reason to travel – for me. I also permit myself another indulgence but strictly in a very sneaky way and it’s probably only been a coincidence and certainly not an objective –a cigarette if I’m lucky– and even two if I’m even luckier. So that’s traveling for me in a nutshell. Good enough!

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JAN 9 -By now I figured it was high time to do a bit of research with the objective of maybe finding something worth looking forward to. This is in direct opposition to my expressed fear and dislike of “preconceived notions” gleefully overlooking the fact that what I’ve been fretting about are an impressive number of prevonceived notions. I elected to overlook this little fact too.

And this is what I came up with:

Neon seems to be a very conspicuous element in the major cities according to Google. Snorkeling, which I would like to do, also produced a fairly reasonable representation in Google: specifically in Cambodia. These both rate very highly on my “to do” list but I bet I don’t encounter either one. For one thing, the ship is not in the cities at night to view the neon. And, although there are two places on our itinerary which could possibly involve snorkeling, they seem to be strictly beach resorts and we’d have to arrange the snorkeling on our own. In Cambodia? Oh, boy, I don’t think so. In one of the places it appears we may conceivably be dumped off the back end of the ship: some ships come equipped with a rear end garage door which drops down to create a platform dock and which permits egress into a hold which stores water sports equipment. Any location in which the ship is anchored is assuredly too deep to see much snorkeling , and anyway having almost been killed jumping off boats to snorkel at least 3 times, In Cozumel they fed us full of tequila slammers to make up for it - I don’t think that’s an option in Cambodia.

I picked up a bit of history in my searches.

it MAY BE EVEN MORE FOREIGN THAN I ENVISIONED…THIS IS VERY FOREIGN…..maybe so but the “major” cities appear to be the exact opposite –that’s where the impressive amount of neon appears. So why is it that it seems so foreign to me; So very unlike the general most commonly encountered environments/cultural identities I’ve encountered? Maybe this term needs defining. In the meantime this is the impression it conveys: Most impressively and up until very recently it presented a very negative, low profile, and actually hardly existed as a viable encounterable/visitable entity.

It is time for a reality check, time to quit with the denial and remember what was going on in the ‘60s. Starting with Vietnam: Initially it was part of China until 800AD; thereafter it consisted of three separate entities TONKIN/ANNAM/COCHIN CHINA, In the 17th/18th centuries it became a part of French Indo China. The French left a short time after WWII, the end of colonialism left a vacuum in the area which developed into full scale Communist oriented civil war, US troops became involved in response to a feared concern that the area would become Communist – the notorious DOMINO THEORY . That war was SOOOO CONTROVERSIAL in the ‘60’s. The US withdrew in 1973 leaviing the defense of Saigon up to the South Vietnamese. The country was not reunited until 1979 and this under a communist regime however the basic economic condition is only marginally/officially Communist, as it involves free trade conditions.

Interestingly enough, although the capital is Hanoi and is in the north of the country, and Saigon is known formally as HoChiMin City, the southern population refers to it still as Saigon.

As an interesting foot note, my gography book refers to the entire area of Southeast Asia as suffering from : ”multiple name complex”: Siam, the only country not colonized but with strong British influence ,– adopted a new name, Thailand. Burma has become tenuously Myanmar, Cambodia is presumably Kampuchea but I think that never held, and Saigon is Ho Chi Minh City. Laos and Vietnam were French Indo China but the actual country names have remained the same.

The last I heard there wasn’t much in Bangkok but brothels and KLONGS. This is the impression I got from a recently written series I read. hMMM – how’s that for a wrong impression?

SINGAPORE; founded 1819 by Brit Raffles to protect opium trade route – the Mallaca Strait-strategic.

SIHANOUKVILLE – premier tourist destination since late 20thc – that’s not saying much. Beaches and islands. I heard these waters were as good as the Seychelles. I hope I have a chance to appreciate.

SEASIA; I have remembered a major distinction of this area that I encountered through my reading many times - it was that it has served as a playground for the worlds youth: Great weather, /cheap upkeep, lots of kids, and there’s marijuana and booze. This was “ European youth on the prowl”.

NO DESTINATION…

I seem to perceive a distinct paucity in DESTINATIONS - could it be there are none? Or perhaps just not the kind I’m accustomed to. Whatever, this is my kind of trip. True, it does contain the prime world tourist destination– Angkor Wat but there’s a lot of space remaining that’s unaccounted for.

We’ve signed up for two VERY NEAT trips which are actually conceivably free of monuments: the Mekhong Delta (which apparently is a World Heritage Site under threat of disappearing due to global warming; and Halong Bay which is the location of the limestone pinnacles I have wanted to visit for a long time. I have been under the interesting impression that these islands were in the vicinity of Saigon. That’s what happens when you are unfamiliar with an area. I suspect you automatically assume everything is close to the most familiar reference point which in this case is Saigon. It’s actually quite a distance away in the northern part of the country.

I am pleased to discover/sense that I have traded my prior travel concerns for one which is much more positive and worthy: that I NOT MISS ANYTHING. This attitude is more positive than worrying about doing the trip justice or worrying about the inadequacies of my current photo objective.

Jan12

Jan13 - I’m waiting… marking time…. Ready to go….I”m thinking there’s a good chance some of this may be just as seedy as I expected. I’ve seen 2 Yutubes… they looked seedy. One was Sihanoukville snorkeling. There is no way I’m going to be dumped into the ocean off the side of a boat o-oo I’ve been there, done that… almost got killed….i’m too old for that. THE SUSPENCE IS OVER – THE DAY HAS FINALY COME \*\* AND I AM READY!

PAUSE

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