

Asian journey, from China to Malaya

Diary of a journey through Southeast Asia in 2005

Janet Waltham

After various joint expeditions to the caves of China, Prof Zhu Xuewen, than head of the Caves section of the Karst Institute in Guilin, asked Tony to organise a group of international karst experts to be invited to China for a ten-day field excursion. The purpose of this was to visit some of the giant sinkholes that Zhu had recently discovered and had called tiankengs, so that they could be better appreciated and recognised in the world outside China. We all had to get ourselves to Chongqing, and then all was on the house, and it must rank as one of the best-ever karst field trips; thank you Zhu.

Instead of flying directly into Chongqing and out of Guilin, Jan and I travelled by devious routes, to include the field trip in a grand journey.

The following pages are extracted from Jan's book,

Love from T & J: Postcards from Abroad

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Postcards from China and Southeast Asia 2005

Hello from the Yangtze, October 14

We are here safely in China, after two days of seemingly interminable flights, via a night in Dubai. We just had a morning in Hong Kong, so not much sightseeing time, before catching the overnight train into mainland China. Chaotic railway station, about 800 people crammed into one waiting room, and military-uniformed women screaming incomprehensibly through loud-hailers. But we successfully managed to get on the right train, thanks to Tony's still-not-bad Mandarin. On to another train in Guangzhou, where we shared a six-berth sleeper section with five Chinese, but it was OK, as the bottom two bunks were for two grandparents and a small girl who shared with grandma.

Yesterday morning was a five-hour bus journey from Wuhan to Yichang. Entertaining, with most of the motorway under serious reconstruction with concrete blocks littered all over the place, and a driver continually blaring his horn at sundry chickens crossing the road, overloaded coal-trucks weaving from lane to lane in an agony of indecision, and the occasional old man dragging a large tree along the fast lane. As they do.

This morning we had a trip to the Three Gorges Dam, which is not finished but not far off, and impressive and fascinating to see. Tomorrow, we board the ferry for a three-day cruise up the Yangtze through the gorges themselves, from where we are here in Yichang, upstream to Chongqing, where we are meeting Zhu and the other geologists for Tony's field trip. And tonight we hope to repeat last night's dinner, of a really good buffet in the rooftop revolving restaurant of our hotel, for rather less than £4 each.

Hello from Chongqing, October 18

The Three Gorges cruise was brilliant. The ferry was excellent and Tony had booked a cabin to ourselves which was well worth while; most of them were four or six berth. Apart from two small tour-groups of Australians, we were the only Westerners, and being on our own we had a certain novelty value. We made some





Yangtze Three Gorges.

good friends despite having minimal language between us, and people were lining up to have their photos taken with us.

We had a second trip to the dam on the first day of the cruise, this time in brilliant sunshine, and a couple of extra locations thrown in, so definitely worth going again. Then the next day, by which time we were upstream of the second major gorge, we were all decanted on to smaller boats to go up the Small Three Gorges, branching off the main river. And then we shunted on to even-littler boats to navigate

the Mini Three Gorges. We felt like Russian dolls. Along the way we had three stops at temples and shrines with assorted goods and gods on offer from hundreds of stallholders, selling everything from temple bells to tiny whole birds roasted on sticks. Back on the big boat again, we had an afternoon sunbathing on deck.

We had various other trips ashore in the three days, including more temples and emperors' palaces, each of them up several hundred steps of course. Also the town of Fengdu, which is a huge new city on one side of the river, but we stopped in the old town, built in the '50s we guess, on the other side, which is being totally demolished for when the water level rises during the next two years. It was built just too low for the new reservoir level, so half a million people are moving house.

In general though we have seen very little evidence of major displacement, certainly not without equally major rehousing. And the gorges themselves are so vast that the extra 60 metres of water will have very little impact. So that's all right then. They have our seal of approval, and can get on with it.

Now we are off the ferry, and have met up with Prof Zhu in Chongqing, a city which seems extraordinary with the amount of high-rise development newly built since we were here 12 years ago. The other geologists are arriving this afternoon, so it's all rocks and caves for the next 10 days.

Hello from Guilin, October 30

We have just come to the end of a very action-packed tour during which we have not had a moment to stop and think, let alone write. There were thirteen of us: five Brits, four Americans, two Slovenians, a Ukranian and an Australian, plus varying combinations of Chinese at any given time. We have been to some truly spectacular

places that have got all the geologists very excited. Some of the sites were already developed for tourists, show caves, amazing deep, narrow gorges and natural bridges, for which the Chinese want to get World Heritage status, and are looking to our scientists for advice and backing. A highlight was San Qiao, near the city of Wulong, with its provincial park containing three enormous natural bridges in between giant sinkholes, fortunately with a lift for the 400 feet of descent to the path across the floors of the sinkholes and beneath the bridges. Much of the scenery has been hidden in the mist and thick cloud, which was disappointing, but the weather has gradually improved, and all the individual sites we went to were OK, including the giant sinkhole of Xiaozhai Tiankeng, down 2800 steps – and the same up again. Sadly though, the lengthy bus trips in between were not as scenic as they should have been.

Travelling around has been an experience. Hours and hours on buses or convoys of eleven jeeps, all behind a police escort with flashing lights leading the procession, thankfully not with sirens blaring, but plenty of horns at all times. At several places we visited there were great banners strung up over the entrances saying ‘Welcome to the International Karst Scientific Expedition’, and at one tiny village in front of a huge cave entrance (Erwang Dong) we had an ear-splitting reception of fire crackers. And photo shoots with television cameras following us at all times.

At the village with the big cave, Lilian Eavis and I let the others go off for their caving bit and we stayed in the village, much to the entertainment of the inhabitants. I was invited into a couple of houses where families were having their lunch, but since polite conversation was not an option there was not much more I could do than make my excuses and leave after a quick cup of green tea. The next few days were taken with a flight to Nanning and then a lot of sinkhole-spotting in the Leye area, before a long bus-ride to Guilin.

When not travelling or sightseeing, we were eating. Since the whole tour is local-government sponsored, hospitality has been laid on with a very heavy hand at every lunch-time and evening. A lot of the dinners were banquets with umpteen local dignitaries, therefore many speeches, many toasts and dish after dish after dish of interesting, to say the least, food. Some tasty, some dubious, some I would rather not touch with a 10-foot chopstick. One lunch we managed 42 dishes, and one of the evening banquets we got up to 57. The ducks’ heads and feet were only marginally worse than the ducks’ tongues – well, they *said* they were tongues – and the sliced pigs’ ears so far hold the record for awfulness, although the bees and



Bemused villagers at the Erwang cave.



Limestone towers at Yangshuo, down the river from Guilin.

wasp grubs were not up to much either. But there has been a huge amount of good stuff as well, and we have eaten an enormous amount. Now we are on our own and paying our own way I suspect we shall be on rather more of a starvation diet.

It was actually rather sad to see all the other Westerners fly home, as we had a very good 12 days with them all, ending up yesterday in a day-long meeting and discussion with about 40 Chinese, that Tony chaired. That was followed by a final farewell banquet, obviously, and a brilliant evening boat trip through four inner-city lakes that were linked by canals with amazing carved and painted bridges, and full of fairy-lit pagodas, dancing fountains, flashing coloured lights everywhere, all very over-the-top and Hong-Kong-Disney-theme-park style. All very different from the rather primitive mainland China town that Guilin was when Tony came first in 1982.

Today our Chinese hosts are joining Tony and I for one last show-cave visit (Guanyan, which Tony and the caving team mapped back in 1985 before it was made into a show cave), then tomorrow we catch the lunchtime train for Vietnam.

Hello from Hue, November 4

We are currently sitting in a pavement café in Hue, with Vietnamese girls peering over our shoulders and giggling, and thousands of cycles streaming along the road in front of us. Very agreeable!

We came into Vietnam on the overnight train from China. We set off at 2.30pm on a very comfortable Chinese sleeper, sharing with a Norwegian headmaster and his wife. That was fine until 1am, at which point the Chinese customs came aboard and we were all up for passport inspection. Then at 4am we were up again at the border, where we had to change to a very **un**comfortable Vietnamese train! We arrived in Hanoi at 8am, and spent the day walking round the city – busy, but fun, with lots of French-influenced architecture, and some concrete buildings and squares from the era of Ho Chi Minh and the communists.

We went on a bus-and-boat tour next day to an area of limestone towers, and the two-hour boat trip went through spectacular scenery and through three caves. Interestingly (as in, that was an interesting experience) it was teeming with rain, the

boats were bamboo punts with no roofs, and the umbrellas weren't quite up to the job. We were soaked, but dried out after about a day and a half.

The proposed night train to Hue was cancelled at the last minute because of a typhoon that had affected Hue quite badly, but the same train went the next morning instead, so we had a very good day's journey, again through beautiful countryside, with good weather, and in the end we were glad that the overnight train had been changed.

Today, another boat trip, up the Perfume River, which was really good, stopping at a selection of pagodas, temples and tombs. We visited one of each, and passed on the remainder, especially since they involved sums of money and pillion rides on the back of motor bikes to get there. Instead we wandered the villages, and ended up in one playing pontoon with a group of Vietnamese children, to their great glee, particularly when Tony teamed up with one little girl who proceeded to help him cheat!

We do like Vietnam, although it suddenly seems very backward compared with China. It's very clear that China has come on at a great pace, and is whole-heartedly westernising, whereas Vietnam is still essentially gentle and peaceful and rather behind-the-times, but full of lovely smiley people. The traffic is the same as before. Bikes and motor bikes criss-crossing from all directions at road junctions like a military tattoo. The only way to cross the road is to walk straight ahead steadily and slowly, and they wend their way round you. Scary, and it takes a bit of nerve, but it works! Anyway, tomorrow we take a bus south to Hoi An.

Hello from Phnom Penh, November 11

We had an excellent couple of days in Hoi An, a lovely town, not huge but with a great atmosphere, and very much the place for a mid-term break. It has a good beach, lovely buildings in the Old Quarter, and an enormous local market where the local people can buy literally everything they could possibly think of to want or need. Hoi An's chief claim to fame, though, is made-to-measure clothes for tourists. They'll create or copy anything, or make something up from a photograph if you like, at reputedly ridiculously low prices. There are dozens of tailors' shops, all doing a roaring trade, I would like to come back sometime when we haven't got three weeks more traveling ahead of us on hand baggage only!



Waterfront at Hoi An.



A little closer to the edge? In the Mekong Delta.

fact there is a very apparent awareness of bird flu in Vietnam, in all the papers and on the television. Not so in Cambodia, where chickens are everywhere.

From Hoi An to Saigon (night train, in at 4.30am!). I had recollections of Saigon as being a vibrant, rather bohemian kind of a place. I must have been thinking of somewhere else. It was quite dirty, concrete-city-ish, so not tempting to stay long. Instead we took a two-day tourist trip through the Mekong Delta en route for Cambodia. That was wonderful. It included a few more compulsory touristy visits – among other things we've seen are silkworm-breeding and silk-spinning from cocoons, rice-paper-making, coconut-toffee-production and catfish-farming. All come with their 'factory-shop', obviously, but are delightful fun nevertheless.



Village house just outside Kampot.

We went over to one of the little islands off the coast on a local ferry, squashed in between a good many passengers and their various bicycles, scooters and boxes and baskets of shopping. But not, you'll be pleased to hear, cratesful of ducks and chickens like you often meet on ferries. Apart from the occasional couple of hens and a cockerel scratching around a back yard, there is a noticeable lack of poultry in both villages and markets. We fear they may all have sneezed their last. In

Next day, just drifting along the canal-side markets and houses and general river-bank activities was absolutely magical, before we crossed into Cambodia along the main Mekong River, and took a bus into Phnom Penh.

Another preconception foiled! We had understood Phnom Penh to be backward, dingy, threatening and all things bad. And the bus station where we arrived was not good. But the river-front area where we found a very good, cheap hotel is brilliant, and Phnom Penh is a cosmopolitan and sophisticated city. Maybe a bit sleepy compared with Saigon, but delightful to be in.

Email reply from son Jonathan

*You've got hand baggage!!!, call yourself seasoned travellers!!?... that's luxury that is!!
Whenever I travel, I don't even wear clothes.... or hair!! In fact I usually have a colonic
irrigation on the runway, just to make sure I'm travelling extra light!!
Paaah.... amateurs!!*

We are going back to Phnom Penh this afternoon, after hopping on a bus yesterday to the 'seaside' town of Kampot. This is really third-world, and no sign of the sea either, just a rather murky river, but all the people are really friendly, and it's a fascinating place to visit and just wander around, which we did, both around the town and to some outlying villages. We had a great bus-ride here as well, literally round the houses, as the driver went on back-roads through all the villages, picking up and dropping off. It meant we didn't get here till after dark, but it was worth it.

As far as weather goes, we are now in the rainy season, and everywhere is quite hot and humid, but we're having a fair amount of sun as well. After Phnom Penh we are off to Angkor Wat for a major dose of ancient temples, and then Thailand.

Hello from Krabi, November 18

After a wonderful boat trip to get there, up the Tonle River and across the huge lake of Tonle Sap, we have ticked off Cambodia's must-do and have-seen Angkor Wat. Very impressive it is too, and we got round by hiring a tuk tuk for the day, so the driver dropped us off at all the right places. We went to four of the dozens of temple sites that were sufficiently different from each other to be good value, particularly the temple ruins of Ta Prohm where they have deliberately left the trees untouched. Massive roots and buttresses of trees hundreds of years old are growing through, on, over and around the thousand-year-old carvings and buildings. It's brilliant.

The magnificent stone ruins of the Buddhist temple of Ta Prohm have been left with the giant forest trees growing on them, to illustrate the condition that most of the Angkor Wat buildings were in before restoration.





Off-road on the bus journey out of Cambodia.

But our archaeological threshold is easily reached and we only had one evening and one day there, before catching the early morning bus for the Thai border and Bangkok. That was an experience. The 95-mile journey to the border took 10 hours over truly atrocious roads. At one point we had to make a detour because a bridge was washed out, which involved paying a farmer to cross his field and fording a sizeable lake in the middle of the track. The driver took a run at it, causing a bow wave that hit the windscreen and the engine predictably stopped. Nothing for it but to push the bus out and up the mud bank beyond. Well, the men pushed and the ladies took photos! Then the driver had to drain the fuel as it had water in it, and send off for more fuel from the next town via a passing motor cyclist. All good fun, but once at the border we crossed on foot and sped 130 miles to Bangkok in just over three hours on superb roads in a luxury double-decker bus. That's the difference between Thailand and Cambodia and Vietnam. Thailand has made it into the glossy First World, the other two are still working on it. But we love them both, though unhappy about the numbers of land-mine-victims in Cambodia, legacy of Khmer Rouge.

Over a full moon we managed to pull in a quick couple of festivals. One involving dragon boat racing in Cambodia, and the other was Loy Krathong, which involved floating decorated and lighted baskets down rivers at Chumphon, in Thailand. Both are supposed to mark the end of the rainy season, but so far not!

Now we're in Krabi, right down on the tsunami-flattened west coast of Thailand. An excellent bus trip to get here through miles of rubber plantations, tapping the trees and hanging sheets of latex out to dry, which I still think is so exciting to see. Possibly because it was the only geography lesson that I ever remember listening to. Well, we're not in Krabi exactly; Railay to be precise, which is a beach village on a peninsula that is only reached by water taxi; this involves wading into the sea to get on to the boat and then the same at the other end. We have our own little bungalow under the coconut palms a few metres from the beach and it's all very idyllic. We arrived here in good time yesterday before the afternoon rain-storm which was mega. Really torrential, brought coconuts and palm fronds crashing down, and with terrific thunder and lightning. The lightning went on long into the evening and we had dinner watching it light up the entire bay, which was very dramatic.

Yesterday morning we took a trip round Phangnga Bay through mangrove swamps, sea-caves and past massive limestone towers rising out of the sea quite freakily; including the one they call James Bond Island, since it was used as the baddy's hideaway in *Man with the Golden Gun*. There is little tsunami evidence here except that all the beach buildings were flattened and are all either new or being rebuilt. Sadly we have to leave here soon, for more islands and then on to Malaysia. Time is running out.

Hello from Penang, November 26

We left Krabi and Railay, had a night in rather nondescript Trang, and then did bus and speed-boat to Ko Muk – we decided against Phi Phi in the end. Ko Muk is small, very quiet, but very pretty. One day we walked across the island to a fishing village on the other side, stopping to watch a rubber production operation – one man in a small shed tipping buckets of liquid latex into trays, then after a couple of hours (on our way back) turning out the now-blubbery stuff on to a mat and kneading and treading it into the squares that are then hung out to dry.

The second day we took a small boat along the coast of Ko Muk to Emerald Cave, which is just a small tunnel through the rock that you swim along for about 80 metres through the dark to a hidden lagoon with a sandy beach at the far end. Lovely, and some very exciting 'sea monster' roaring caused by waves and pockets of air on the way through the cave. Later, we took our own sea kayak out to poke around the limestone coast, but harder work than the longtail boat that took us to the cave.

We left in teeming rain the next morning, bussed down the coast, and then took a ferry across the Malaysian border to the island of Langkawi, for a night in a scruffy little beach hotel. It looked very beautiful, even through the relentless rain, but because of the weather, our planned day there was cut off in its prime by catching the 11am ferry to the mainland – along with many other Malaysian holidaymakers who didn't rate the rain either. The ferry port was reminiscent of a lot of rats leaving the sinking – er – island!

Anyway, we finally fetched up at Georgetown, on the island of Penang, where we are now. It's a really attractive town, very old, Chinese and colonial houses, all a bit faded and knocked about, but still good to see. There are loads of Chinese here, also hordes of Indians, and traditionally it was home to Thais and Burmese as well, so we don't really know who is Malay and who isn't. But all really enjoyable. We have spent today walking round the town, almost in sunshine for once.

Hello from Kuala Lumpur, November 30

We rented a car in Georgetown, from an Indian in a tiny back-street office, no deposit, no credit-card, paid a pittance, "here's the key, and leave it at the tailor's shop if I'm not here". But it worked, and we managed to see some of Perak's limestone areas. Gua Kelam was a fun stream cave, now a bit of a recreation area, but it reaches for



Painted walls in the temple cave of Perak Tong, Ipoh.

a quarter of a mile right through a ridge and is the main route for the locals into an isolated valley of farmland. So a boardwalk all the way through, suspended above the large and noisy stream, and with locals roaring through on motorbikes.

Stayed for the night in the magnificent old Majestic Hotel that is actually the upper floors of the railway station in Ipoh, after an excellent dinner in a Chinese food court that we found in town. Next morning we went to the Perak Tong temple cave, a fantastic sight with hundreds of beautiful paintings, each done by different artists by invitation, on the sweeping smooth walls of the cave chambers, and the usual giant Buddha in the middle. A good drive back past lots more limestone hills, and a few caves, then back over the causeway to Georgetown and the key-drop tailor's shop.

Next day was mostly on a luxury bus to Kuala Lumpur, six hours of relaxed comfort passing endless rice paddies and palm oil plantations, to a high-rise hotel above the city bus station. We had heavy rain most of the evening, followed by a brilliant thunderstorm.

It was still a bit rainy next morning, so we took a local bus to Batu. This was for Tony's benefit, as the site has a tall limestone hill containing a single enormous cave passage that is an important Hindu temple. The bad bit was the 250 steps up to the entrance, but the cave was spectacular and was easily seen with daylight through a series of large holes in the roof. There were hordes of Hindu pilgrims. Then a bus back into town and a ride up the Menara K L Tower for spectacular views across the city, to the Petronas Towers, and of a huge thunderstorm sweeping across the suburbs.

Last evening in Asia, so we had another roast duck dinner in Chinatown, before a late trip to the airport, and the long flights back home.
