

## Three Months in Asia

by Teri Ekland



This summer my husband and I extensively traveled throughout Asia. The journey came about because Don had earned his sabbatical from Intel and we wanted to see as much of the world for as little money as possible. Fortunately, traveling in Asia remains inexpensive, although not everywhere.

We started out in Hong Kong, which, along with Singapore and Japan, ranks at the costly end of Asia. A cheap closet-size room in Kowloon runs 30 to 40 dollars. A room not much better cost us \$50 in Singapore.

In retrospect, a visit to Hong Kong may have been better at the end of our trip after venturing through countries that offered little in the way of conveniences. But we opted to begin in Hong Kong because of the cheaper flight.

From Hong Kong, we easily arranged an overnight boat trip up the Pearl River to Guanzhou, China. I taught English in China ten years ago and I found the differences striking. People dressed in modern, although polyester, clothes rather than Navy blue Mao suits, or Army greens; and several fast food restaurants had emerged. Now Motorcycle traffic rambled down the main roads along with the myriad bicycles and a few private cars. Previously, people were lucky to even own one of the "three things that go round": a bicycle, a watch and a sewing-machine. Now the Chinese were acquiring motorcycles, cars, boom-boxes, televisions, CDs and cellular phones (which every other person on the streets of Hong Kong uses). What remained the same was that very few people spoke English and Chinese hotels were still reluctant to house foreigners (the fear of reprisal syndrome). It'll be interesting to watch China take-over Hong Kong in 1997, although the contrast between Guanzhou and HK isn't as vast as it was ten years ago.

Vietnam, a highlight of our travels, stretched two hours by plane from Hong Kong. I had many expectations about our visit to the war torn country headlined during my childhood. I imagined feeling tremendous sadness about the loss of lives, especially for youthful American soldiers needlessly slaughtered. I thought I'd encounter much resentment toward Americans from the Vietnamese -- for ripping apart their villages and causing the deaths of untold thousands of Vietnamese. Instead, I discovered a strikingly beautiful country of emerald mountains and ivory white beaches stretched along aqua blue surfs. Vietnam had been thriving in spite of America's closed trade policies. The people were kind, eager to speak English and to show us the sights of their cities. One waiter at a cafe in Hue came up to our table and said, "I have tomorrow off. Can I show

you around?" We agreed and the next day we rented bicycles and rode to pagodas, temples and parks along the river.

From Hanoi we flew via Bangkok to Nepal. Unfortunately, we arrived during the monsoon season so we were pestered by rain and mosquitoes. In Pokhara, on our way to Varanasi, India, we caught glimpses of the majestic Anapurna range of the Himalayas, but only during the early morning hours. It were as though these majestic gods would unveil themselves only momentarily for the devotee who awoke by sunrise.

In Varanasi we mostly walked along the ghats (stairwells to the holy Ganges) and watched the pilgrims bathe in the river while performing religious prayers and rites (*puja*). Unfortunately, we had difficulty walking around India because of the constant badgering by street vendors (touts) or boys wanting to be our guides. The best solution was to simply hire a guide to fend off everyone else!

Back in Kathmandu, Nepal, we caught an overland tour and spent two incredible weeks in Tibet. The native Tibetans sang aloud on the streets and always smiled at us. They were, in fact, some of the friendliest people I've ever encountered. For most of the jeep ride across the tundra-like plateau I worried about altitude sickness. The first few days I drank gallons of water to help quell the effects of oxygen depletion (which presented the problem of frequent stops to urinate during the long drive across the bumpy dirt road). I also avoided exerting myself and I often took deep breaths, especially before falling asleep at night. My efforts paid off because I never experienced any symptoms of altitude sickness. Don claimed to have a headache for a few days along with feelings of nausea. In Tibet we saw lots of yaks, monasteries, and pilgrims circumambulating

temples overwhelmingly scented with yak-butter candles. Buddhism seemed to thrive despite the Chinese occupation.

Flying from Lhasa back to Kathmandu offered us a heavenly panorama of the Himalayas. The pilot purposely circled Mount Everest as I snapped a roll of film while marveling at the sight. I have never experienced anything as awesome as viewing these snowcapped mountains looming above the clouds.

By the time we spent our last few weeks in Indonesia, we were both tired of the demands of making our own travel arrangements. Still, we saw several exotic temples, markets and monkey forests in Java and Bali. In Ubud, Bali, we watched the outstanding Ramayana ballet performed to the mystifying Balinese gamelan percussion (xylophone-like) instruments, and we saw legong dances with the dancers in colorful gold trimmed silk costumes. Bali is a beautiful tropical volcanic island that is unfortunately overrun with tourism. As in India, we had difficulty strolling through town or along the beaches without hearing, "hey boss, need transport?" or "hey, you come to my shop. It number one. OK? You Promise!"

Along with the exotic and wonderful adventure of traveling comes the price of being the tourist. We are, after all, a resource of money for the native inhabitants. I guess it's hard to blame anyone for trying to make a living, but, at the same time, it's not easy to endure constant badgering, especially after two months.

All in all we had a nearly perfect odyssey through Asia. We experienced no theft, major sicknesses, or loss of anything we were schlepping around. Also, everything we mailed home has arrived, although in somewhat tattered condition. Best of all, we made

several new friends along the way and collected a vast array of antics and memories to relish and share for the rest of our lives.