

Nov 6th, 2015

Dear All,

As I assume all of you know, I am in the midst of a trip through Southeast Asia and I thought I would update you on how it's going, where I've been, and where I plan to go!

I am currently about halfway through my adventure and have been having the time of my life. I apologize for any lack of updates I have done thus far and I hope this will relieve any questions you may have. I started my trip landing in Bangkok on October 1st. The initial experience was both amazing and overwhelming. En route I felt myself constantly in an internal struggle between anxiety and reassuring myself that all will be well--knowing that stress will only make the situation unpleasant. By the time I made it to my first hostel, all anxiety was instantly quelled. At this point I was completely alone in a big, unfamiliar city, and it felt awesome. I spent less than a day being alone however, as the following afternoon I met my first companions for the trip. From that point forth, I have been with a shifting group of travelers (sometimes groups as big as 14 or as small as 2) until recently (over a month later) when I finally took a few days to travel alone again.

The route that I have been following is one that I am emulating after asking a college friend for advice--and it happens to be a very common path along the backpackers' trail. Because of this, it is extremely easy to meet people just like me. Before I came I assumed that other people would all be traveling in groups or pairs but to my surprise at least 90% of the people I have met have been fellow solo travelers. Within my first few days I discovered that most of the people I met are doing what I am doing but with much more time (anywhere from 6 months to a year or indefinitely). Initially, I had thought 2.5 months would be plenty of time to do what I would like to do, but I quickly came to realize that there are so many places I will not see, as well as places I could spend longer exploring.

Realizing that I actually do not have all the time in the world, I still decided to go about things at my own pace and have had a blast doing so. From Bangkok I embarked to northern Thailand and spent about two weeks between the city of Chiang Mai and a small mountain town called Pai. After this, I worked my way further north to the border of Laos where some friends and I took a 'slowboat' down the Mekong river for 2 days (stopping in a riverside town for a night) before arriving in the Laotian town of Luang Prabang. I spent the next week and a half working my way back south through Lao stopping at a big party town of Vang Vieng (I will omit the details for now) and then making my way to the capital city Vientiane. From there, a common backpacker route is to head to Hanoi in northern Vietnam which was my plan but due to some poor planning I had to wait four days before my visa in Vietnam started so I had time to kill. Instead of waiting in Vientiane (where there isn't a lot for the everyday backpacker) I split up from any fellow travelers and went alone on a bus further south to a town called Thakhek (still in Lao).

This is my first time going off of any route suggested by others and departing from the beaten tourist track. I am writing to you now after I just made my way through the most uncertain part of my journey--and possibly one of my favorites. I spent two nights in Thakhek and met a few other travelers (none of whom were doing exactly what I was). The most exciting part about departing from tourist destinations is that nobody on this path speaks english and I get to see the country in a way that isn't affected by tourism. I planned to head to Hanoi from there but was unable to find a bus that worked with my agenda. I instead took it even further into my own hands and looked at a map and found another city in Vietnam I could head to on the way to Hanoi. After asking the bus station attendant about it (in very minimal english) he was able to tell me the bus left at 9 or 10am and that the timetable which says 7am

is wrong. I nervously took his word for it, hoping I would actually be able to catch this bus (I was to buy the ticket on the bus so I didn't have to worry about losing money if I didn't catch it). Upon arriving to the station the next morning at 9, I found the bus and discovered it was not actually leaving until 11am. By the time it eventually pulled out of the station at noon, I was one of 8 people on it and the only westerner and english speaker. Nervously hoping this bus would actually take me where it said it would I decided it would be an exciting adventure anyway. Right away however, my stress rose as a casually dressed man asked for my passport (this was a bus crossing the border, and he collected the passports of others as well--so I assumed all would be well) and I reluctantly gave it to him. After a few stressful hours I got my passport back once we crossed the border. This whole adventure was made very fun and entertaining as the other passengers and the people at the border would try and communicate with me. These conversations didn't go very far and usually ended with them laughing. Towards the end of the bus ride we pulled over and got food with locals at a place that was something between a house and a restaurant (a really common thing to see) and I found myself the subject of more entertainment as one man kept putting strange foods on my plate for me to eat.

I eventually made it to the city of Vinh, Vietnam on a rainy Friday night at 9pm with no plans on where to stay or what to do. Further, I did not have any Vietnamese Dong and found myself facing an ATM with a broken button for English and had to navigate the menus in Vietnamese. Long story short, it was a successful adventure and I am now on a train to Hanoi (which I got on as it was in motion leaving the station) to meet up with some travelers I had split up with nearly a week before.

I apologize for the lengthy anecdote but it was something I felt the need to share. Before I end this long email I would like to inform you that from here I plan on exploring northern Vietnam for a few weeks before working my way south to Ho Chi Minh. I then hope to spend about a week in Cambodia and if time allows I will either go lounge on beaches in southern Cambodia or southern Thailand before my flight out of Bangkok on December 10th.

I hope everyone is having a fantastic fall and I can't wait to see/hear from everybody in the coming month-or-so.

Sincerely,

Ed