



Marie and Steve on their Trans-Siberian adventure

The

LONG

Keen to mark the end of their time in Singapore with a spot of adventure,

Way Home

British expatriate Marie Kreft

and partner Steve decided to travel home overland.

STEVE AND I CAUGHT THE Singapore to Kuala Lumpur train on a sultry September evening, sad to leave our adopted home in the Lion City. Already well-acquainted with Kuala Lumpur (KL), we used the Arab Quarter as a base for catching the sights we hadn't seen before, and stuffed our faces with heavenly Middle Eastern cuisine.

Our coach from KL to the Cameron Highlands seemed to wind forever up a misty mountain, flanked by glimpses of strawberry fields and tea plantations. A roaring bonfire and delicious curries warmed the chilly night in Tanah Rata, but with the drizzly climate too reminiscent of home, Steve and I were keen for Thai sunshine. We crossed the border to the Land of Smiles in a creaky old bus from Ipoh.

CAUGHT IN A COUP
Conscious of social



A Bangkok soldier after the military coup

unrest in Thailand's southern provinces, we didn't linger long in the proverbial elephant's trunk. Our fears proved tragically founded when, exactly a week after we'd slurped noodles in a Hat Yai street, four people were killed by six bombs scattered across Songkhla's commercial hub. Never again will I berate myself for over-cautiousness.

When the news broke, Steve and I were lazing around the royal seaside retreat of Hua Hin, having fallen in love with the sunsets over Koh Lanta and spicy mango salads in Ao Nang. Our detour to Phra Nakhon Khiri near Phetchaburi provided comic relief when two angry macaques mistook Steve for an alpha-male monkey. But

a coach ride later, we found ourselves in Bangkok - in time for the Thai military coup. Watching CNN's footage of tanks rolling into Bangkok's Government House,

A roaring bonfire and delicious curries warmed the chilly night in Tanah Rata...



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Steve and I both phoned home. Official information was still vague and confused, but from thousands of miles away our families' advice was unambiguous: Get out of Thailand.

We didn't – straightaway. The coup happened peacefully; an army of flower-bearing soldiers wore yellow armbands in affiliation to their revered monarch King Bhumibol Adulyadej (Rama IX). But aware of the ousted Prime Minister Thaksin's loyal supporters in northern Thailand, Steve and I abandoned our plans to see Chiang Rai and Chiang Mai. We spent a restful weekend on the tiny island of Koh Samet before heading to Trat, our gateway to Cambodia.

INDOCHINA CHARM

In a 12-hour minibus marathon to Sihanoukville, Cambodia, we saw villages of flimsy wooden huts and mucky swamps, with children herding water buffalo to rice paddies. Toddlers played in puddles with only sticks for toys while older kids tugged at our arms and begged for food. Never before had I given my heart so readily to a country – one rendered lush and magical by the rainy season – where its tragic and turbulent past belied by people's magnetic smiles.

When Sihanoukville's washed-up seaside charms faded for Steve and me, we made for Bokor National Park, with its abandoned hill station lying in ghostly testament to Cambodia's French colonial days – and later devastation under the Khmer Rouge.

Our knowledge of the country's tragic recent history deepened from exploring Phnom Penh, and made us even sadder to witness Cambodia's past greatness at the fabulous ruins of Angkor.

VIETNAM BY RAIL

And then to Vietnam where we dreamed up images of old Saigon from cyclo rides around Ho Chi Minh City; stretched out on white sands in Nha Trang; and sampled fresh cold beer from the movie-set perfect streets of Hoi An. Traversing the country's length in upright wooden train seats and



- 1. Sunset over the Thai island of Koh Lanta
- 2. Vietnamese silk lanterns
- 3. A scene from the Temple of Heaven in Beijing
- 4. A tuk-tuk approaches Phnom Penh's Royal Palace

5. Just a small section of the 2,400-km long Great Wall of China.

6. The Terracotta Army in Xi'an is touted as the eighth wonder of the world.

7. An exotic dragonfly in Siem Reap

cramped sleeping cabins, we met a wonderful cast of local characters – most welcoming; others not; many delighted to relieve us of our rapidly dwindling funds.

ANCIENT BEAUTIES

We travelled by train from the chaotic Old Quarter of Hanoi and crossed the border into China from Lao Cai, kissing goodbye to our confiscated guidebook in a customs check. China had been an unknown quantity for both of us, and we marvelled at each transition from bumpy, dust-blown mountain roads into cities that could swallow Central London whole and still have space for dessert.

Journeying from Meng Zu to Kunming, Chengdu to Xi'an, and finally to Beijing, we lived the stuff of travellers' dreams – Giant Pandas, Sichuan opera, the Terracotta Army, Tiananmen Square, the Forbidden City, the Summer Palace, acrobatics, temples, monasteries, museums and mausoleums.

We could've lost ourselves in China forever, but the whistle on the Tran-Siberian Express was blowing.

CABIN FEVER

Taking five-and-a-half days to traverse over 9,000 km of Mongolian desert, snowy Siberia and Christmas card-perfect Russian villages, the Beijing-to-Moscow link was a great way to unwind from our non-stop sightseeing. Armed with Tolstoy, Dostoevsky and thick Russian ale, we pulled on our thermal socks and enjoyed the frost-dusted scenery unravelling outside.

The bleak chic of Moscow at the other end came as an expensive shock. We were fast running out of cash, and our Singapore dollars didn't convert well. Faced with the choice of limping back by train through Eastern Europe, or catching a budget flight straight into the arms of our families, Steve and I picked the latter.

I'm disappointed we didn't make it all the way. But three months on the road, exploring six new countries and collecting a lifetime of stories, we've both developed a passion for overland travel that will last forever. **fi**



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