



Prisma

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New theme : if you wish to share a passion or an interesting experience, please do not hesitate to contact Chantal Schopfer. Here is Sébastien Rossel's story who left for a 10-month trip around the world with his girlfriend (www.tourdesagnard.com)..

Sebastien and Magali, a 10-month trek

30th December 2007, 9 am, Geneva Airport

"Ladies and Gentlemen, flight A212 to London has been cancelled due to a technical problem, please reclaim your baggage and return to the nearest company counter to be placed on another flight". We were off to a bad start as we left on a 10-month adventure trip, and here we were, stuck before our first flight.

8 months earlier

"So, Magali, are we going on this trip?" "I don't know, what do you think, Sebastien?" "I'm all for it. Let's go?" "Ok! But where?" "Good question!"

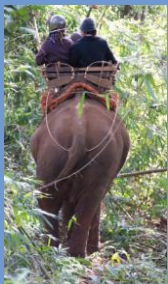
30th December, 10.30 am, somewhere between Geneva and London

On our way at last, well to London anyway. All our flights had been changed. As a result, to get to Phnom Penh (Cambodia), we had to go through London, Peking, Guangzhou (China) then finally Cambodia. The only problem was that we had to take a domestic Chinese flight and we didn't have visas or the tickets for the flights from Peking! We had to spend more than 2 hours in Peking haggling with the airline company to get our tickets.

6 months earlier: Sebastien, you have a letter from Metalor, could that be the response to your request for sabbatical leave? Super, they've agreed, we're off!

The adventure was starting to take shape. We already had an idea of our itinerary; we would spend 4 months in Asia, then 5 months in South America with a few days in Hong-Kong and a 2-week "holiday" in Guadeloupe between the two.

31st December, 6 pm Phnom Penh airport (Cambodia)



Finally arrived! Boy, is it hot! It was around 0° C in Switzerland and here we were dripping. We will be able to rest up after 36 hours of flying. This evening is New Year. But we don't have the stamina to await midnight. After a quick cocktail on the terrace of a café, we went off to bed. We must have been a bit jet-lagged, we slept until 2 pm the following day!

We visited the capital with its temples, its museums and its concentration camp (ethnic cleaning under the Khmer Rouge 1975-1979). We would be spending 3 weeks in the country, making our way through the jungle in the east with its elephant rides, in the center the fresh-water dolphins looking for and of course the temples in Angkor.



The Angkor site, near the town of Siem Reap, is the most visited place of interest in Asia. This old capital of the Khmer empire (9th to 15th century), a classified UNESCO world heritage site, is the most extensive area of temples in the world with more than 30 of them dating from Khmer empire. Certain temples, such as Angkor Wat is still in active use, whereas the majority was abandoned and are now covered and hidden by the jungle. You could believe that you were in an Indiana Jones or Lara Croft film, with immense roots twisting around the walls covered with superb engravings.





After Cambodia, we crossed the east of Thailand to Vientiane, the capital of Laos. Originally, we had not envisaged visiting Laos, which is why we spent only 2 weeks there, and yet it is one of the most beautiful countries we visited, still unspoilt by mass tourism. After exploring the capital, we went to Wang Wieng, a hangout for hard-up travelers, who spend their evenings slouched on settees watching endless repetitive TV soaps on a giant screen rather than visiting the extraordinary local caves. As for the town of Luang Prabang, it is really super, with all its temples still in operation. The procession of monks at 5 am to receive offerings from the faithful is impressive.



One question that we are often asked is: How did you get around those countries? It is simple, we took local transport. The buses, for example, are often in a very poor state, local music is constantly blaring, the roads have more potholes than pitch and air-conditioning is replaced by the bus door which is never closes. When we were really lucky, we had a TV which broadcast local clips in loops, for which one does not need to understand the language to follow the story.

After two whole days on a boat to get to the north of Thailand, we had only 4 weeks left to visit this country. We started by discovering the local and rural life in Chiang Rai where we spent a few days in a tribal village, then we set out to visit the old capitals of the area - Chiang Mai, Sukhothai, Ayutthaya and of course Bangkok.



After 2 months of visiting temples and ruins, we needed a break in paradise so we rested up for a week on the small island of Ko Mak, in a little beach hut with palm trees, white sand, small fish and the hammock which is essential in this setting.



1st March, Bangkok airport

"Hello, your tickets please. Sorry, I cannot find any reservation in your name. But there is still room on the flight, so you are OK for today, but check the rest of your reservations!"

Our flights were obviously problematic. Now we understood why we always had to get to the airports 4 hours ahead of time. Our flight took us to Delhi for a radical change of landscapes and cultures.

First night in Delhi, and we were already being screwed. We paid a 3-star price for our 1-star hotel. Moreover, the cabby gave us the wrong change (it is not a good idea to arrive at 2 am, without having reserved a hotel).

After the kindness and helpfulness we had until now encountered, this came as a real shock. We were out of there in a flash, fleeing the capital to go to see Rajasthan. The maharajas' palaces are splendid.



After Rajasthan, we decided to go and visit the north of India a bit with the gold temple of Amritsar, the holy site of the Sikhs.



The landscapes became increasingly deserts and, in Jaisalmer, we spent 2 days riding camels under a blazing sun.

In India, cows are sacred, therefore they wander everywhere, which can be rather funny, but with the heat, the stench is often not easily bearable.

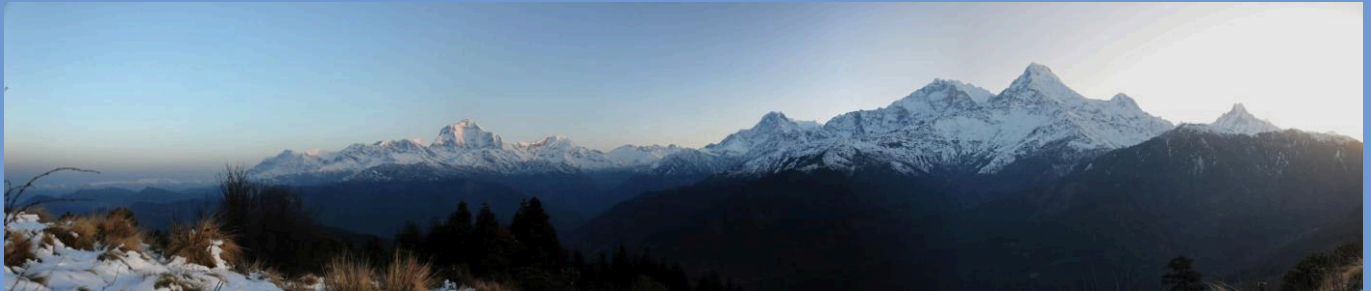


Then we went to take a breather in the mountains at Dharamsala, the village where the Dalai-Lama lives. Even though the fresh, unpolluted mountain air was nice (a bit like back home), we set out again for Agra, known for the Taj Mahal. On the way to Vârânasî, we stopped to see the temples at Khajurâho with its erotic representations!



Vârânasî is as mystical as it is polluted. Our hotel was right behind the cremation ghats.

After having spent 5 weeks visiting northern India, we moved towards Nepal. We organized a 10-day trek in the Himalayas to reach the Annapurna base camp (4100m). The climb is tough, but the view from the top with some of the highest mountains in the world is really worth the effort.



On the way to Kathmandu, we stopped on a reserve to bathe with elephants and to admire white rhinoceros and monkeys, but unfortunately no tigers.

We visited Kathmandu valley with its historic sites, its temples and stupas.

The Hindu religion impressed us very much, with all its mini-temples which one could mistake for simple stones at ground level and its Pantheon of more than 3 million gods.



To be continued in the next edition...