

REPORT

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In Defense of the Organized Tour, and Humanity Impacts of Traveling Abroad on Internationalizing Curriculum

There was “Sam” who was my tour guide in Thailand. His real name is Somporn Pakkaseenang. He was raised on a farm near the Cambodian border. When soldiers came telling him that it was time for him to come to war, Sam left for the big city. Bangkok. When the soldiers came around Sam’s home asking for his whereabouts, his father would reply, “I don’t know where Sam went.”

“The street was my university,” Sam said. “That’s where I got my education.”

There was “Thai” who was my tour guide in Cambodia. He was also raised on a farm and was a natural hunter. He loved the outdoors; loved catching animals. Farm life didn’t speak to him and he wanted an education so as a young man, he joined the army. It was the only way that he saw to earn enough money to go to school. He figured if he survived, he would have a bright future, and if he didn’t, he wouldn’t have to worry about it. When describing where he was stationed, he said that it was in the north of Cambodia, that he didn’t think he would get out alive, and that claymores are very powerful.

There was “Rex” who was my tour guide in Vietnam. He was also raised on a farm. The war he knew was the ‘American War’ which, in America, is known as the ‘Vietnam War.’ He showed me the ‘War Remnants Museum’ in Ho Chi Minh City (formerly Saigon); the Chu Li tunnels that Vietnamese patriots used when fighting the Americans; and the Hong Ngoc Fine Art Company which is a business founded by a former United States Vietnam Veteran to employ Vietnamese either disabled during the war or disabled by birth defects caused by Agent Orange.

In stark contrast to the lives these men have lived, my fears seemed paltry in comparison.

Why was it that I feared even traveling; going on vacation?

There were a few nights, after I booked my trip, when I awoke in the darkness then laid in bed, feeling fear. What was I doing? Why was I going? Life was pretty good, right where I had it. What would I experience? Malaria. Japanese Encephalitis. Dengue Fever. These are just some of the diseases of which the CDC website warns travelers who are thinking of venturing to Southeast Asia. Uncertainty, I believe, is the root of all fear. What will happen? Will I be okay?

Despite my fear there is also something that calls me on; draws me to travel; to learn and to grow; to experience the unfamiliar; to broaden my horizons; to not be a slave to fear; to divine the line between reasonable caution and brash carelessness.

It’s a big world out there, with a lot of people, a lot of different ways of living, and a lot of things of which I knew nothing about (and some of which could harm me!) – what was I going to discover on my journeys?

I booked my tour with Overseas Adventure Travel. A tour company. An organized tour through Thailand, Vietnam and Cambodia. For most of my life, I belonged to that group of people who believe that organized tours are for those who aren't daring enough, or adventurous enough, to figure things out on their own. Well, okay, maybe that's true, and maybe I was looking for a little security, someone to act as a liaison between myself and their culture. Someone who could make my introduction to some of the foreign cultures of the east go a little more smoothly. Also, the idea of having all of the logistics handled appealed to me. I wouldn't have to worry about where I was going to sleep, where I was going to eat, what I was going to see, nor how I was going to get there. Having everything organized and laid out in an itinerary appealed to me. With some dismay it dawned on me that this, among other things, is a sign that I have reached middle-age.

I booked my own flight, however. Still in transition maybe. I would do the organized tour through Thailand, Vietnam and Cambodia and then venture into Indonesia on my own to pursue one of the passions from my youth and surf some of the famed waves of the world's largest archipelago.

My flight would take me from Fresno to San Francisco to Narita (Japan) to Bangkok to Denpasar (Bali), and then back. A week before I left, the news reported political unrest in Bangkok. People asked me if my trip was still on and if I was nervous. The tour company had yet to cancel it so, yes, my trip still seemed to be on and, no, I wasn't nervous. People seemed to be a little surprised by this, as was I. 'Had I seen the news?' several different people asked. 'No, I didn't like watching the news,' I replied, so maybe that had something to do with it.

When I landed in Narita, I was excited to get sushi. There are many great things about Japan, I knew this from having visited this country a few years before, and among them is sushi. Japan is also a very clean country, and fairly well-developed – even first-world, perhaps, though I do not know who bestows such distinctions – so I wasn't concerned about food-borne illnesses. I walked through the airport with a few hours between flights, looking for the restaurant where I wanted to eat, and then finding it. Sitting at the sushi counter next to me was a young couple who had just flown out of Bangkok.

"Have you seen the headlines?" They asked me.

"No," I said, shaking my head.

The young man proceeded to take a newspaper out of his bag. He unfolded it.

There, in large black letters, was the headline:

BANGKOK IS BURNING

Below the headline, were pictures.

Yes, indeed, it did look like Bangkok was burning. There were buildings on fire, cars on fire, some guy running and throwing something in front of a fire. People had been shot and killed.

"Are you worried about flying there?" The young woman asked.

“Strangely enough,” I said, “I’m not.”

I didn’t understand why this didn’t worry me.

When I landed in Bangkok, it was night. I walked out of the airport and could smell the smoke in the air. Bangkok was burning, and here was the proof, in the smell of the air.

I’d flown in a day early, a day before my tour was to start. My plan was to get there a little early, just in case I encountered some difficulties in transit and also to allow myself a little extra time to get over jet-lag, but now I was wishing that I had a representative from the tour company to meet me at the airport, explain the situation, and shuttle me to the hotel that they had deemed safe.

There was no such person to meet me.

I looked around at my options then grabbed a taxi and had the driver take me to a hotel near the airport.

Did he speak English?

No, he didn’t speak English.

I would have liked to communicate with someone about the situation. I didn’t know what I was getting into, nor how close I was to the political turmoil. Had more people been shot? Was I going to be far from where there had been riots? There was no way for me to know.

The driver dropped me off at the hotel.

The people at the front desk spoke a little English.

“Was I, were we, close to the political turmoil; the riots?”

“No, not close.”

“But there’s the smell of smoke in the air.”

“Yes, smoke in the air. Bangkok burning. Riots.”

The answers weren’t totally clear. I got the key to my room. Walked to the elevator. The hotel looked like the type of cement, rebar, cinder-block construction that you see on the news in a pile of rubble after a lesser-developed country experiences an earthquake. My mind sure could worry about some things. It was funny how the mind worried about some things and not other things. I rode the elevator up to my floor. Hopefully there wouldn’t be an earthquake. Hopefully angry dissidents wouldn’t come to the hotel and execute foreigners just because, well, they were tired of first-world nations like America shitting on them. I got in my room. A mosquito was buzzing around. Political turmoil, a multi-story hotel sure to crumble in an earthquake, and a mosquito certainly capable of transmitting one of many various mosquito-borne tropical illnesses – this was my first night in Bangkok.

I put up my mosquito net then laid in bed, unable to sleep either because of the uncertainty of my situation, or jet-lag. Probably both.

The next day dawned and I was still alive.

I went down to the lobby. It was pretty much empty. There were a few people. Two people were in the restaurant. Did I want something to eat? No, but thank you. The restaurant did not inspire confidence. I got a bottle of water then talked with the lady at the front-desk.

“How is the situation in Bangkok?”

“Not good. Many people shot.”

“Many people?”

“Yes.”

Okay. Touring Bangkok was off the slate for the day.

I got a ride back to the airport. That would be a good place to spend the day. They had food there. I'd get something to eat at the airport then take it from there; maybe learn some more about what was going on. Spend the day there then meet my friend who was flying in that evening. There was comfort in numbers. We could go into Bangkok together and meet our tour guide. If we died in the process, well, at least we would die together.

I walked around the airport. I got a bowl of Thai Curry at 'Mr. Famous Cooking Restaurant.' I walked around the airport more. The newspapers confirmed what people had been telling me. Bangkok was in the midst of political turmoil and a lot of people had been killed in the shooting. I walked to one end of the airport where some young kids in their early twenties who were barefoot and dirty and looked like Caucasian Rastafarians with dreads were lounging on the tile, looking very chilled out. Two of them were sleeping and one of them was reading a book. I sat down near them then meditated for an hour.

When I finished, I looked towards them and made eye-contact with one of them.

“You guys look like you're the masters of chill,” I said.

They laughed and nodded.

“You're so chilled out, just relaxing on the floor.”

“Yeah, this place is heaven,” one of them said.

Maybe he saw the curious expression on my face.

“It's nice, clean. Air-conditioned.” The guy who was talking had an accent. “There's a drinking faucet with clean water. A bathroom.” He smiled a huge smile, beaming. “Heaven.”

I laughed.

The guy and his friend laughed.

The girl was still asleep.

“What you were doing, you meditate?” The guy asked.

“Yes,” I said.

“How does one meditate?” The young guy asked.

I came over and sat down with them. We introduced ourselves. They were from Spain. They had been traveling for six months. I told them about meditation and then they told me about their journeys. For most of six months, they’d been living by their wits. Everybody, all of their friends, they were just going to school, working towards their careers. These guys, unlike their friends, hadn’t wanted to do that. They had wanted to see the world, to let the world be their school.

They nodded, saying this, smiling.

They’d left school, quit their jobs and bought plane tickets to Australia, New Zealand and Thailand. The problem was, after the first few weeks, they’d spent all of their money like crazy fools. Living the good life. Partying. Living high. Since then, they’d had to figure it out on their own. Working a little here and there; meeting people; relying on the kindness of strangers.

“What have you learned from all of your travels?” I asked them. “Teach me.”

“So many things,” they said, and then shared some of what they had learned with me.

The world is a kind place. It will take care of you. Always be generous. No matter how little you have, always share, because it always comes back to you.

Those were the things that stuck with me.

I shared my almonds with them.

“Eat as much as you want,” I said. “I’ve had enough of almonds.”

They devoured my almonds.

After talking with them through the afternoon, I suggested we get some dinner together. They would love to but they were out of money. They’d spent the last of their money getting to the airport. They would eat on the plane and then they would be home again, in Spain.

“That’s alright,” I said. “I’ll buy you dinner. It will be a good end to your great adventure.”

How can I reconcile the disparities between the different ways in which we all live; the different economies to which we all become accustomed; the different lifestyles; the differences within our very own hearts; the good and bad that resides in each of us?

I know this, that when you talk with someone, no matter where they are from, you will soon realize, they are just like you. Just like you.

I said good-bye to my new friends feeling as if they had shared with me just what I needed to hear: the world was a good place and it would take care of you; it was important to be kind; it was important to share. You could have an adventure and not know what was going to happen and still have everything turn-out alright.

I went and looked at the list of flights scheduled for arrival – my friend’s plane had been cancelled.

I was dismayed at this news, but glad that tonight I would be staying in the hotel my tour company had booked. I went downstairs and found another taxi. Gave the driver the name of the hotel. He spoke a little English.

“Are the riots still bad?” I asked.

“Not good,” he said.

“People are still being shot?”

“Yes.”

There was a stretch of silence.

“Is my hotel close to the riots,” I asked, “to where people are being shot?”

“Not too close,” he said.

“Not too close?”

“A few blocks away,” he said.

That wasn’t encouraging. Maybe I was being stupid. The freeway was mostly deserted because there was a curfew in effect. Nobody was supposed to be on the streets after 8 PM aside from a few exceptions, like tourists being transported either from or to the airport. We came to a military checkpoint. Men with large machine guns checked my passport. I smiled and nodded agreeably. The taxi driver talked to them in Thai. They handed me my passport then waved us through. The city streets were empty too. I saw two people on foot. They were looking down the dark empty street as if looking for something. One of them had something in his hand. Was that a gun? He raised it and took a photo of whatever he was looking at in the distance. We passed them then went through a maze of streets and finally came to my hotel. The driver pulled over at the corner.

“I let you out here,” he said, already unloading my bags onto the empty sidewalk. “That’s your hotel.”

He pointed at a dark hotel.

“Okay,” I said. I handed him the money for the fare. “Thank you.”

“Go in quickly,” he said.

The taxi driver got back in his car. I picked up my bags and started towards the hotel.

“This way, this way,” someone yelled to me.

Several people were running towards me; gesturing towards me. They were dressed like hotel employees. I ran towards them. They relieved me of my baggage. We went inside. The lobby was empty. A woman was working the front counter.

“How is everything here?” I asked.

She gave me a look as if the answer to this question should be obvious.

“Are we safe here?”

“Yes,” she said. “Safe here.”

Indeed, it did turn out that I was safe there, and everywhere else on my trip. Not long after I’d checked into the hotel, while I was still in the lobby, two more individuals who were on my tour arrived at the hotel along with the tour guide, Sam. I was glad to no longer be on my own, and the next day our tour began. We saw many of the main sights of Bangkok and Sam kept remarking, “I’ve never seen this place so empty. No tourists.”

It seems, everyone else, had gone home.

The political turmoil calmed down. Over eighty people had been killed. We went into the Thailand countryside for a few days and when we returned to Bangkok, the curfew had been lifted.

While in the countryside, we saw memorials, graveyards, and museums dedicated to documenting what the Japanese did during World War II, using forced-labor prisoner-of-war camps to build a railroad between Thailand and Burma. The prisoner-of-war camps were located about every five miles along the construction of the railroad, and two of the camps gained international notoriety: the camp at “The Bridge Over The River Kwai” and the camp at “The Hellfire Pass.”

That was then, this is now – I couldn’t help but to ponder the way humans treat each other.

While in Vietnam, and in Cambodia, and while talking with my tour guides, again I saw this – the ravages of war, and how it had impacted so many people in this region of the world in so many different ways.

I wish I could find an answer to explain the aggression that seems to lurk in the heart of every human, along with the goodness that also resides there too.

While the ravages of war definitely left an impact and made an impression upon me during my travels, the disparities of our economies also stood out to me.

My travels made me more aware of how much we take for granted, living in a first-world country: our freedom; the opportunities that are available to us; clean drinking water; healthcare; education; not having to worry about landmines buried in our forests; being able to criticize the government if we choose without being put in jail (as in Thailand). This awareness also makes me more grateful for where I live.

How will this impact the curriculum of my courses and help internationalize it?

I think, more than anything, what I will now bring to the students is a broader-perspective of this world and personal anecdotes of how fortunate they are to be able to even be sitting in the classroom, pursuing their education. I know I will share with them some of the experiences I had like, for instance, this one:

At an age when I was attending high school, one of my tour guides, Thai, was joining the Cambodian Army so that he could potentially have the opportunity of an education. Visiting a memorial for dead soldiers with Thai, he stopped suddenly as we walked towards the wall with the names on it.

“Some of my friends, their names are there, on that wall,” he said.

He looked to me, looking like he was on the verge of some emotion, and maybe even panic as if surprised he’d just walked this close to a past he’d rather avoid.

“You go take a look at the names,” he said. “I’ll be waiting back there.”