

Girton College Travel Grant Report Summer 2005

Work, Travel, and Volunteering in East & South East Asia

When I began telling people about my summer plans I got the distinct impression that people thought I must either be joking, crazy, or quite possibly both! Not that I can really blame anyone for this presumption, considering the nature of the plans...

I was to begin the summer with a couple of weeks of work for a London law firm, before heading off to Europe with the University Naval Unit, coming back for a day and then catching the EuroStar (a competition freebie) to Belgium for a week of relative down-time. Not content with this I was then to fly out to Hong Kong for another month of legal work, and afterwards to make a solo journey through China, across Laos, and into Cambodia where I was to volunteer in a house-building project for local people! Phew! Having written that down, it seems easy to see where these non-believers were coming from!



Nick Cook, n-line.co.uk



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Looking back, I am delighted to be able to smile sweetly and quote a Chinese proverb I learned over the summer:

有志者，事竟成

(you3 zhi4 zhe, shi4 jing4 cheng2)

Translated literally this means: *If a person has ambition, things will be accomplished*, and is roughly equivalent to the English idiom: *Where there's a will, there's a way*. As such, I am delighted to inform the Trustees that the proposed plans were completed in full with only a minor alteration in Vientiane (where it became obvious that I needed to skip ahead to take account for the rainy season's adverse affects on road conditions).

Before I get into an in-depth breakdown of the trip, I want to take a moment to graciously thank the trustees for their kind and generous support. Thank you! All I can say is that it is your support that turned these plans into reality, and your help in this is very much appreciated.

The East Asian leg of my journey began as July was turning into August. I heaved my bulging rucksack from Cambridge down to London, transversing the nightmare that is ThamesLink (I'd rather try my luck with the Laotian bus service!) and caught an 18 hour flight from Gatwick to Hong Kong via Dubai.

Once there, I began my one-month internship with some apprehension, but a few days later I was well into the swing of things and enjoying the opportunity very much. Hong Kong is an excellent place to work and a great environment to learn more about the law, ironically it really helped my understanding of English law!

While I was there I met so many great people, both during the course of work and after hours. I'm still in touch with many of them and I'm sure that one or two will remain life-long friends.



Nick Cook, n-line.co.uk



Eventually, of course, I had to leave... I did my best to leap-frog over Guangzhou, and caught a sleeper train out towards the Laotian border, hundreds of miles away. I've always loved Chinese rail-travel; looking at the photos it's easy to see why! The train itself is a miniature community living out the daily ritual of Chinese life. This journey was particularly spectacular with captivating mountain scenery providing light relief from the journey.

My first port of call after Guangzhou was Kunming, capital of Yunnan province. Having spent 4 months or so in China over the past few years Kunming surprised me by being unlike any other Chinese cities (by this I mean clean, well ordered, with a sensible traffic system)!

Not only this but my time in China gave me the opportunity to try out my fledgling mandarin skills for the first time in 6 months, and I was delighted by the noticeable improvement. Kunming is a fabulous place to visit, even if there are rather too many snobbish travellers there (people who seem to have got themselves lost on a detour from the Vietnam leg of the Indochina loop)!

The journey into Laos was one of the hardest trips I've ever made, especially on the back of the 30 hour journey from Guangzhou. Thirty-Four hours, three busses, an attempted scam and a dodgy *Songthaw* later (a kind of pickup-truck with a roof and railings added as an afterthought) and I was in Laos at last! After resolving an attempted scam the minibus then proceeded to get stuck in mud and all the passengers had to get out to assist!

Come to think of it, this entire trip contains four of the hardest journeys I've ever made. Of course this is probably due to the [crazy?] speed I was trying to cover ground at. Oh yes, if anyone ever offers you the chance to travel overland Vientiane to Siam Reap in a day: **just say no!** It isn't worth it, I'm a hardened travel-masochist and even I regretted it!



Anyway, I was pleasantly surprised by my arrival at Luang Nam Tha, a Lao town which owes a great deal to its proximity to the Chinese border, and the town was far more pleasant than I'd been expecting. Having said that I did manage to have some unusual escapes with the resident Chinese who, for some bizarre reason, weren't prepared to serve foreigners (even if the foreigner in question was speaking Chinese to them).



A day of cooling off was more than a little necessary at this point and I spent the day cycling around the outlying area, trying to get a feeling of Laos. Instead I got sunburnt... very sunburnt! It seems that I've really upset someone because following my immense new redness the heavens opened and I received a bonus drenching. At least the Israeli guys staying at my guesthouse got some amusement from the incident!

The next day I moved on, heading for Luang Prabang. However, along the way we were delayed 5 hours on the way when an HGV whose driver didn't seem to appreciate the importance of maintaining his breaks decided to plough into the side of the bus. As blasé as I'm being about this I certainly moved fast to get out of the way and I've been persuaded that aisle seats may well be the way forward!

After the police arrived and money changed hands (at times like these I'm pleased my Lao is quite so-so!) I decided to get off early

and take a *Songthaw* to Nong Khiaw. Apart from meaning that I could escape the backbone-crunching road this gave me the chance to take a long-tail down the river the next day. Eight hours in the boat was great fun, I even had the chance to stop off in one of the riverside villages and get a few photos for the website.

The next stop, Luang Prabang is fairly low-key as far as tourist sites go. The temples were interesting enough, but didn't really live up to the ambitious sales pitch of "Angkor in the city" (albeit taking a rather liberal interpretation of the word "city"). There was certainly a lot of history in the air, however, and the French influences were obvious everywhere, strikingly from the international-class star French restaurants and hotels, of which there are more here than anywhere else in Laos including the capital; 5 star cuisine at bargain basement prices.



After Luang Prabang the capital city of Vientiane was something of a disappointment, grey blocky architecture and high prices reminded me more of Ho Chi Min City, Vietnam than anything I'd encountered in Laos so far. At this point I had to make a radical decision to deviate from my intended route through Southern Laos. The rainy season hadn't ended as early as I'd hoped and, after experiencing the quality of roads in the North, I was concerned that I'd miss my rendezvous with the building group in Phnom Penh if I took this route.

So it was that I made a detour of several hundred miles (and 35 hours) to Bangkok, stopping just long enough to have a couple of coffees, before pressing on to Cambodia (to make sure I reached Cambodia in good time), managing to spend less than a day in Thailand in the process (but leaving me virtually comatose from tiredness for the next few days!). I'd done the Bangkok → Siam Reap leg several years previously, and it just goes to show that time really does have a healing effect on memory as I'd forgotten just how bad the road was. It's an oft-quoted joke that people only ever tackle this road once; fool that I am for doing it again.

Having put myself back on schedule I dropped into Siam Reap to visit the world famous temples of Angkor, one of the wonders of the Ancient world. My second trip to Angkor and the place is still somewhat indescribable. Simply breathtaking. Having seen the majority of the temples in the past I decided to go a little further afield on this trip and even visit Banteay Srei and the nearby waterfall where apsara dancers have been carved into the rock itself, going for a refreshing dip after the trek through the jungle.



It's hard to describe the amazing experience that is Angkor without pictures, and rather than forcing them on you here, your best bet is to type "Angkor" into google images and see what turns up [well actually, your best bet is to get yourself on a flight to Bangkok with a transfer to Siam Reap, but in the absence of this, the google thing is a close second]

Anyway, A few days later I was in Phnom Penh, waiting to meet the team I would be spending the next 5 days with to carry out the house-building project. Being Cambodia I shouldn't have been surprised that the staff at the Golden Gate hotel let me sit in their reception for 4 hours before passing on the message that the group would be meeting me at the FCO on the riverside.

My time with the group flew by. We were in Sihanoukville by early afternoon the next day and then we got stuck into the building work straight away. Man was the work hard! The first day I finished up soaked in my own sweat, and the second day I was left shivering by the almost constant downpour.

It was fantastic to arrive at each construction site, meet and greet the families before beginning work on the skeleton like structures. Our first job was always to nail down the floor (relatively easy) before moving on to securing the walls. The walls were trickier but the whole experiences was great fun, and very worthwhile (although there were moments when my eyes and mouth were full of falling sawdust that I might not have been so generous!)

As a result of this project eight Cambodian families have new houses and I would like to direct the thanks they offered me in the direction of the board of trustees for their part in assisting the project.



After the house-building was over all that was left was for me to get myself back to Bangkok (and of course to do some shopping before I left!). The rest of the team headed on towards Phnom Penh where they had connecting flights to Siam Reap and Hanoi while I continued the journey westwards, my route through Cambodia identical to a previous trip two years earlier; how strange it was to think about how much I'd changed since last time I travelled these roads.

I've never got used to the final few days of a lengthy time travelling. You're left in a kind of limbo, knowing that it will all be over soon and yet trying to make the most of the time you have left (somehow it feels like a kind of reverse home-sickness!). Sitting in Bangkok airport lounge, something I seem to have become uncomfortably familiar with, is always one of the low-points of a trip in South East Asia.

On this occasion, I was not to be given the chance for self-reflection until I got on the plane. As I reached check-on, cursing myself for being 6 hours early for my 6:30am flight, I discovered that my flight had in fact been cancelled. This was not good. I was already pushing the dates of the Cambridge term. Being so early, however, I managed to entice one of the lovely Emirates staff to transfer my ticket to an earlier flight (although I did have to run to get to the gate on time!)

Overall, I hope it's clear that I got a great deal out of the summer. I worked in another country, gaining valuable experience which will help push forward my career ambitions and assist my plans to take a masters course in Chinese after finishing my law degree. I travelled in East Asia, learned a greater appreciation for the region's cultures and language, learnt more about Laos, and helped in a volunteer project in Cambodia. Perhaps more than anything else I will take with me the memory of the many kind people I met on the way.

Looking back at the journey, it should be obvious that the pace of the travel was truly breakneck. When you travel for a month and have four 30-hour journeys (not counting air travel) then you know you've been travelling hard! I was thrilled, however, to have achieved everything I had set out to do and I now all that was left was to consider the mountain of emails that would be waiting for me when I got home. I returned to Cambridge with not even a day to spare and hit the start of term running (I'm still catching up from this, it seems!)

Finally, as you might imagine, since my return I've discovered a new-found and all-encompassing dislike of the question: "So, what did you do over the summer?!"

Thank you Girton! ☺

The author maintains a website at www.n-line.co.uk
Additional photos and a detailed travel blog are available here