

Tom Greco's Letter from Asia

"Contrast and compare," that's a standard academic exercise. It's also something that comes naturally when one travels in foreign lands.

The superficial differences in culture, of course, are easy, but understanding the values, attitudes, beliefs and other motivations that underlie the behavior patterns of a people can be a daunting task for even devoted anthropologists and sociologists much less for the casual traveler. The legendary inscrutability of the Chinese seems well matched in other parts of Asia that I've explored. This seems to be particularly true in areas that have become popular tourist destinations. I suppose one would need to spend a lot of time in a diversity of such places to get any useful sense of how indigenous cultures have adapted to and taken advantage of the onslaught of foreign visitors. What does it do to a people's way of life when there is a steady stream of strangers who inevitably come to be seen as a natural resource to be "mined" by the indigenous population.

"Taxi, sir?" "Hello, where you go?" "Come in, sir, have a look." CD, Rolex, nice batik shirt?" "Massage?" "Hello, sir, do you have a lady booking?" These are just a few of the common verbal volleys one must fend off as one walks down the streets. There are, of course, local variations. In my experience, pimping, for example, was most prevalent in Hat Yai (Thailand), there was some of it in certain sections of Kuala Lumpur (Malaysia), and none in Ubud (Bali). Everyone, it seems, is selling something or running some kind of scam. The scams are usually pretty mild but can turn out to be costly. I'm ashamed to admit that I paid four dollars one day for a newspaper. Hawkers take advantage of the fact that currency exchange rates can be confusing. Bali is part of Indonesia. The Indonesian currency is the "rupia" and the current exchange rate with the dollar is roughly 10,000 to one. I should have paid about 4,000 rupia for the paper, but a temporary confusion caused me to hand over 40,000 instead. I came to realize my mistake as the hawker walked quickly away giggling with a broad grin on his face.

Bali

Bali is probably one of the most democratically governed places in the world. It also has a very tight-knit social structure that centers on family ties and the local "Banjar" (pronounced, ban-yar). A Banjar is a local neighborhood or village organization that is administered through a democratic structure. These banjars, which are small and numerous, have social, political and religious significance. There can be many banjars within a village or town. Virtually everyone belongs to a banjar, which provides a person with a large measure of his/her identity.

One of the most popular tourist destinations in Bali is the community of Ubud, the upland area that is supposed to be the cultural center of the island. After staying a couple days in the heart of Ubud, I felt harassed and a bit sad. Despite their efforts to maintain their culture and way of life, it seems to me that the people of Ubud have become far too dependent upon foreign visitors. The competition for the tourist dollar, euro and yen is intense. A leisurely, peaceful walk down the street is all but impossible. I was continually pressured to engage taxis I did not need and to buy stuff I did not want. I felt like I was the object of some predatory entity that keeps manifesting in slightly different form. That situation is not unique to Bali, of course, it's one that is common to virtually all popular destinations that cannot help but degenerate into "tourist traps." I've had a similar experience in other places, including Goa (India), which was even worse.

But everywhere I go there is something interesting to be discovered and something to be appreciated. In Ubud I appreciated the wonderful body pampering and massages that can be had at any of the numerous spas for fees that are ridiculously low. A one hour traditional Balinese massage can be had for 40,000 to 50,000 rupia (around 5 dollars US). On one occasion I splurged and paid an additional three dollars to follow up with a body scrub, yogurt mask, and bathtub soak complete with flower petals floating in the tub.

What you won't find in Ubud is discotheques or western fast food chains. With the object of maintaining the cultural authenticity of the place, all of the banjars that comprise Ubud have agreed that such disruptive influences and manifestations of foreign cultures will not be allowed. Their avowed intention is to avoid becoming like Kuta, the main tourist destination in Bali, which I did not visit. One can imagine that the pressures to include the KFC's and McDonald's must be intense but it seems the banjars still have enough power to call the shots. Still, one wonders how long they will be able to resist the pressures that large corporations typically assert through central governments.

Where I've Been and What I've Been Doing

You may be wondering why it's been such a long time between my last report and this one. The reason is that between September 14 and November 5, I was traveling in Malaysia, Thailand, and Bali and was either too busy or not feeling motivated to write. There's far too much to tell about so I'll just mention places visited and a few highlights. Kuala Lumpur has become my favorite jumping-off point because I like the city and one can easily get from there to most Asian destinations at low cost. There are coaches that will take you comfortably to other places inside Malaysia and numerous flights to virtually everywhere from KL's modern award-winning airport.

Penang and Langkawi are two islands in the north just off the west coast of the Malay peninsula. I enjoyed a few days on each of them. Langkawi is the more beautiful and scenic of the two, but Penang has Georgetown, a charming old town that bustles with life and has managed to retain its old colonial character. It also has a national park, which appears to be an undiscovered treasure that's just a half-hour away from Georgetown by city bus (U101). It has great hiking trails and beaches and a variety of wildlife. The beaches and water are very clean and are reachable by hiking trails, or a boat can be hired to take you by sea. I hiked a half hour to one of the closest beaches and had the place virtually to myself. Next time I'll take my bathing suit and a picnic lunch.

Thailand

To go from Langkawi to Thailand, there are a number of options. I chose to take the one hour ferry boat ride to Satun. From Satun, I took a minivan to Hat Yai where I spent two nights in quite a nice hotel for 500 Bhat per night (about 16 dollars US). What does Hat Yai have to recommend it? Mainly, it's the point of departure for buses to the islands of Koh Samui, Koh Phangan, and Koh Tau. Other than that, it draws tourists, many from Malaysia, for shopping and sex.

Getting from Hat Yai to Koh Phangan involves a five hour bus ride, a 2 hour wait, and a 3 hour ferry boat ride. The bus ride itself was not terribly uncomfortable but the "entertainment" provided by the onboard TV was annoying. Even with my ever ready earplugs, I could not fully escape the assault. The programming was a relentless sequence of inane onstage banter in which every comment was punctuated by a drum beat or clash of cymbals and canned laughter. I could not understand a word of it, of course, but none of my fellow passengers seemed to be amused either.

Koh Phangan island is one of my favorite places so far. It provides a great variety of beautiful scenery, lovely beaches, great food, opportunities for socializing, the usual amenities like internet access, and interesting things to do. It will eventually be spoiled as it becomes an increasingly popular tourist destination (as I've heard of Koh Samui), but for now it's pretty ideal. This would be a great place to come on a yacht. It has some of the nicest beaches anywhere, the best of which are accessible only by boat. It's the kind of place where I could easily become a beach bum and get seriously into retirement living.

What Next?

On Sunday I'll leave Auroville and head for the airport at Chennai (Madras) where I'll catch my flight to London early Monday morning. I'm in the process of making my itinerary for visits and meetings in the UK during my two week stopover. Then, on the 26th of November I'll fly back to San Francisco. After that, I just don't know. The expatriate lifestyle seems to suit me so I may want to return to Asia fairly soon. I've found a few places that I like where I can live pretty well on my small retirement income.

I'm feeling motivated to complete some writing projects that I've had on the back burner for the past few years. I can do that most anywhere so I might as well do it in a place that is pleasant and provides me with some comfort. Once I've managed to get a good grip on completing the next book, I'd like to secure further opportunities to lecture and teach. More later. Tom