AROUND THE WORLD IN 45 DAYS

26th January to 12th March 1994





OUR TRANSPORT

We used many types of transport on our journeys.
The montage opposite includes some of them (asterisked below)
Pictures of many others are elsewhere in this book

LAND

ROAD
- Self-drive rental cars (5) *
- Buses / Coaches (4)
- Taxis / Minibuses (19)
- Tuk-tuk (1) *

RAIL
- Malaysian Train
- Kuranda Train *
- Sydney monorail *
- Sentosa monorail
- Katoomba cliff railway
- Penang Hill funicular *

and Feet !

WATER

SEA
- "MarieAnda" (Fiji) * (with tender and glass-bottomed boat)
- "Inter-Islander" (NZ) *
- Captain Cook cruise (Sydney) *
- "Terri-Too" (Cairns)
- "Reef Jet" (Cairns)
- "Yellow-Submarine" (Green Island)
- "Cheng Ho" (Singapore) *

RIVER (Bangkok)
- "River Sun" cruise
- Long-tailed speed-boat *
- Hotel shuttle boat
- Free ferry

AIR/AERIAL
- Commercial airliners (9) *
- Sentosa Cable-car *
- Penang para-sailing *





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Malaysia - Bangkok -U.K. - Los Angeles - Fiji - New Zealand - Australia - Bali - Singapore -



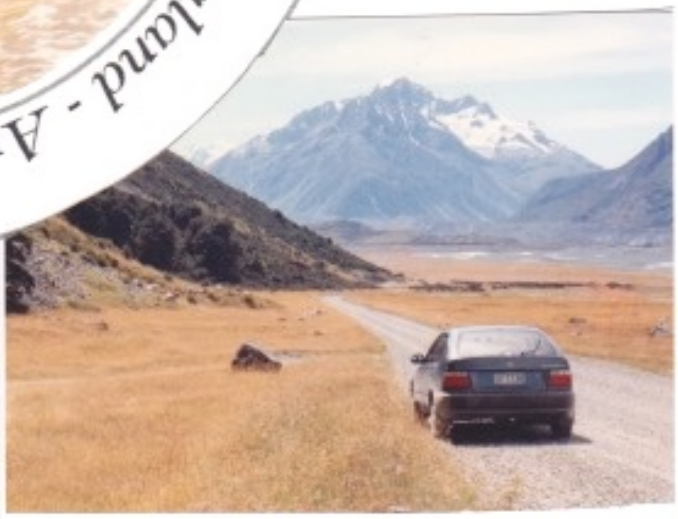






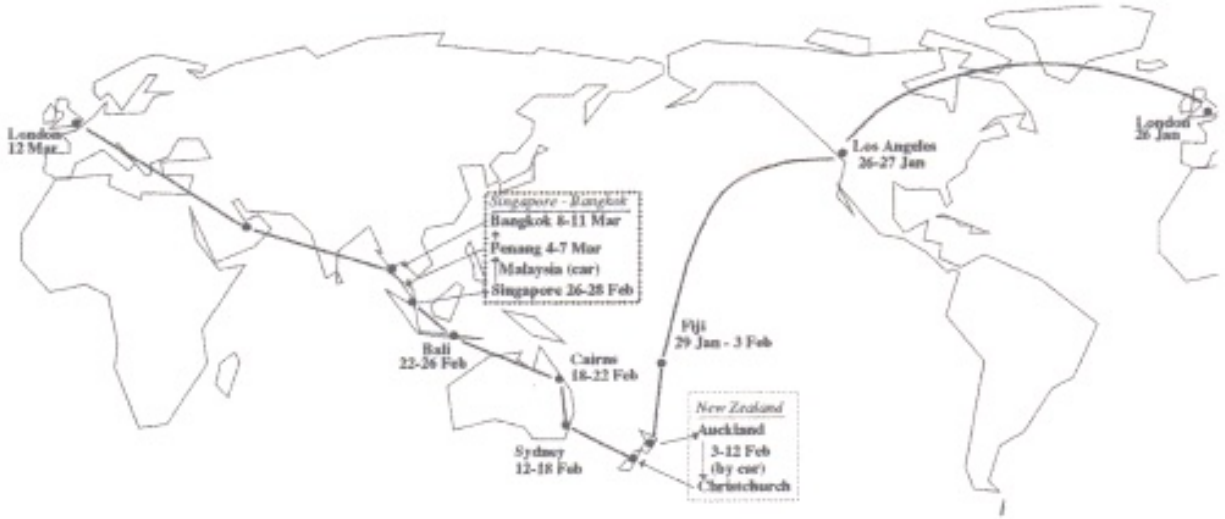








AROUND THE WORLD IN 45 DAYS



STAGE ONE - LONDON TO FIJI via LOS ANGELES

26th January 1994



To the earthquake! Would we find problems at LA? Booked in at the Airport Hilton just in case. Up and away with Virgin just after noon. Fine views of the Greenland ice-cap en route. Arrived in Los Angeles at about 3.30 p.m., collected rental car (brand-new Mercury Topaz), and found the Hilton - easier to find the Hilton than to negotiate its subterranean car park and escape to the lobby! All too large and impersonal.

27th January



LAGUNA BEACH

Left Hilton as quickly as possible! No problems at all with traffic in LA going south. Headed for Huntington Beach (Denny's breakfast, then through Newport Beach to the pretty Laguna Beach. Back through Long Beach, Redondo Beach and Manhattan Beach to LA. The radio said there had been a 4.5 after-shock this afternoon - we never noticed it!

Air NZ left on time for Honolulu (a wait in transit lounge which could have been anywhere!). Then onward to Nadi. Crossed International Date Line, so Friday 28th January hardly existed for us! Air NZ flights relatively comfortable and on time - but what dowdy air-hostesses!

29th January

Arrived Nadi at 5.30 a.m.

STAGE TWO - FIJI AND THE BLUE LAGOON CRUISE

29th January



Fiji welcome - a shell lei around our necks!.

Arrived at the 'Regent of Fiji' at about 7 a.m and immediately set out along the beach, walking for about 20 minutes. Failed to read the weather! The heavens opened and the wind blew- the torrential rain came at us horizontally. We attempted to shelter for a few minutes - but this wasn't the usual 10 minute tropical storm! We ran back, dripping, to the Regent. Hot shower and dry clothes before going to the breakfast buffet. What a way to begin our holiday! And then we heard that this was the edge of a threatening cyclone! Would our cruise be cancelled?

We were in suspense for the rest of this somewhat stormy day.

the Regent of Fiji





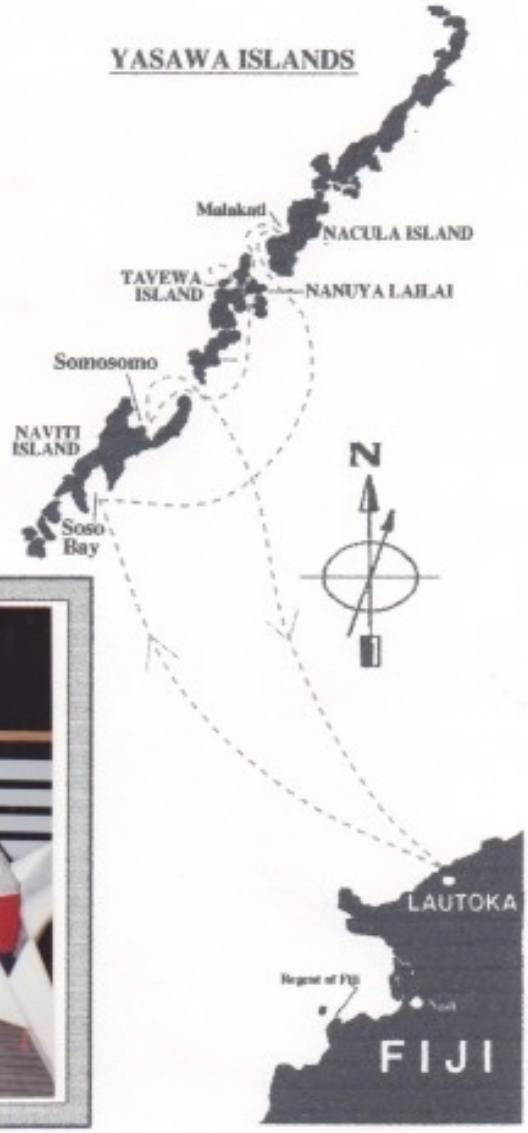


30th January

The weather cleared at last. Off we went to Lautoka to join the Blue Lagoon Cruise. Blue Lagoon Cruises were started by Captain Trevor Withers, a New Zealander, in 1950; he chose the name because he had assisted in the making of the Jean Simmond film, "Blue Lagoon", shot on location in the Yasawa Islands.

We joined the MV Marieanda, and sailed for the Yasawa Islands at 3 p.m. Cool drinks next, with our fellow passengers, and our Fijian cruise-director, 'Ben'; we were soon all friends. Just 13 passengers on a ship which could accommodate 40; and more than 13 crew - we should be well looked after.

That night we anchored in Soso Bay; after the 'Captain's Dinner' the crew entertained us with songs, and we joined them in drinking Kava (slightly narcotic dish-water prepared from Yaqona root)







31st January

Anchor weighed at 7 a.m. and we followed the south-east shores of the Yasawa islands, eventually passing through a channel to the other side, reaching a small unpopulated island near Malakati by mid-morning (Picture at foot of next page). This was our first trip ashore - just the place for beach-combing for pieces of coral and giant clam shells. Beautiful weather and calm sea!

Lunch on board, and then sailed for Nanuya Lailai.

31st January -continued

The rest of the day at Nanuya Lailai - an island coconut plantation owned and maintained by Blue Lagoon Cruises. Coral viewing was the first highlight - by glass-bottomed boat. This was low tide, so the boat was barely clearing the coral - even scraping it occasionally despite Ben's care. Marvellous views of the brilliant colours of this underwater garden and of the tropical fish and starfish. Those who had seen the Great Barrier Reef thought that this was even better - though far less extensive of course. Took photos through the glass bottom - (but the results were disappointing).



After tea we played volleyball with the crew - and with the Japanese girls, who participate in just about everything! This was fun - even though the crew had to put up with our extreme incompetence, and we had to put up with a few mosquitos as dusk approached!

Back to the ship for a short while - then ashore again (sprayed with mosquito repellent) for a 'lovo' - meal with veg cooked in an underground oven (good meat, boring veg) 'International time' followed. Slightly pressurised passengers provided small acts - This medley hardly matched the talent of the crew, but the judgement was that everyone had won - 'prizes' were distributed by Ben.



USA - a jitterbug dance
Canada - a little anecdote
Japan - a sweet little song
Spain - a charming address in Spanish which turned out to be an apology for not entering the competition!
England - '5 Green Bottles' (assisted by the crew)

And so to bed!



The first island





1st February

After breakfast we cruised to Tavewa Island and spent the morning there. After some further coral viewing and swimming - in the clearest, smoothest, water imaginable - Ben told us all about the coconut so that we could survive if we were marooned on the island (!) - and later told us about the plants and medicinal roots.

We then walked to the village to meet the 'chief' - Harry, aged 85, who fought in the Fiji Army during the war and now owns the island, living there with 40 or so members of his family.



After a barbecue lunch on the island, we continued the cruise to Somosomo and walked to its village. We learnt a little about the life of the village; on our way out of the village, a 'market' had been set up by the women to induce us to buy souvenirs at relatively high prices.

Dinner on the ship, and then back to the village for entertainment. The ladies were presented with floral leis, and we sat on rush matting in the 'village hall'. Dances were quite spectacular in their way; men in warrior-like attire and women in blue tops and long red skirts covered by a traditionally patterned sulu (sarong). We joined in the shuffle of traditional Fiji style dancing at the end.





2nd February

Boat to the beach at 6 a.m. (for the early risers!) for a last swim at Somosomo and then back to the ship for a 7 a.m. departure for Lautoka. Nearing Lautoka was the time for photographs, for the crew to sing the 'Isa Lei' ("Oh! Forget not , when you are far away precious moments beside Nanuya Bay"); and finally the time for our farewells to Ben, to the crew, and to our fellow passengers. It had been a marvellous three days; of course the perfect weather and calm sea made all the difference.



The honeymoon couple - New Zealander Kate and Londoner Gary who owns 2 pubs.

Gary Don Francisco David Bob Ted

Kate Peggy Angelina Kay Betty-Lou Harumi Harue

Japanese - who had learnt English in New Zealand. They did everything (and for Harue this meant severe sun-burn)

The Renshaws, Canadians from Vancouver. He has a travel business - in the Renshaw Building; she paints pictures which sell!

From Pamplona. They didn't speak a word of English, but spoke to us in voluble Spanish under the impression that we understood! Fortunately Bob did.

Bob, Betty-Lou and son Ted, from Pennsylvania. Bob is a trouble-shooter for Westinghouse Nuclear Power. Betty-Lou (with much gold jewellery) is a beauty consultant.
Ted is a (charming) student

Back to the Regent of Fiji - swimming and a beach walk in the afternoon. We then went to a display of 'Firewalking' - presented quite spectacularly, but the actual 'fire-walking' was really rather tame; hot stones, yes, but not much fire. We were surprised to be charged $22 for this (and in the end, having pointed out to the manager the scope for misunderstanding, the charge was removed from our bill).

3rd February

Our last day in Fiji. We went to Nadi - and experienced the salesmanship of the predominantly Indian shop-keepers; the urging at every shop to come inside, the invitation to have a free cold drink, the constant offering of discounts. A ludicrous price of $38 for a set of coasters eventually came down to $7!

Back at the hotel the heavens opened again and on our way to the airport the roads were flooded. How lucky we were to have four perfect days for the Blue Lagoon cruise - in this, the rainy season.

The plane left late due to confusion over a passenger and his baggage, and we reached Auckland after midnight.

STAGE THREE - NEW ZEALAND







FROM FIJI
3rd Feb.

Auckland

4th Feb

Rotoroa

5th Feb

Turangi

6th Feb

Wellington

7th Feb

Nelson

8th Feb

Greymouth

9th Feb

Fox

10th Feb

Wanaka

11th Feb

Tekapo

12th Feb

Christchurch

TO SYDNEY
12th Feb.

4th February

Drove from Auckland Airport TravelLodge more or less directly to Rotorua and booked in at Gwendoline Court Motel - a really nice 'suite' , with its own thermally heated spa, for $99 (£40). Whakarewarewa Thermal Reserve was just up the road - sulphurous smells and steam everywhere, and bubbling mud pools within the Reserve area.

That evening we went to the 'Hangi' Maori concert at the Sheraton. The stage show was reasonably entertaining, but didn't come up to expectations - too little of the Maori culture and far too much padding and 'audience participation'. More of a cabaret act!





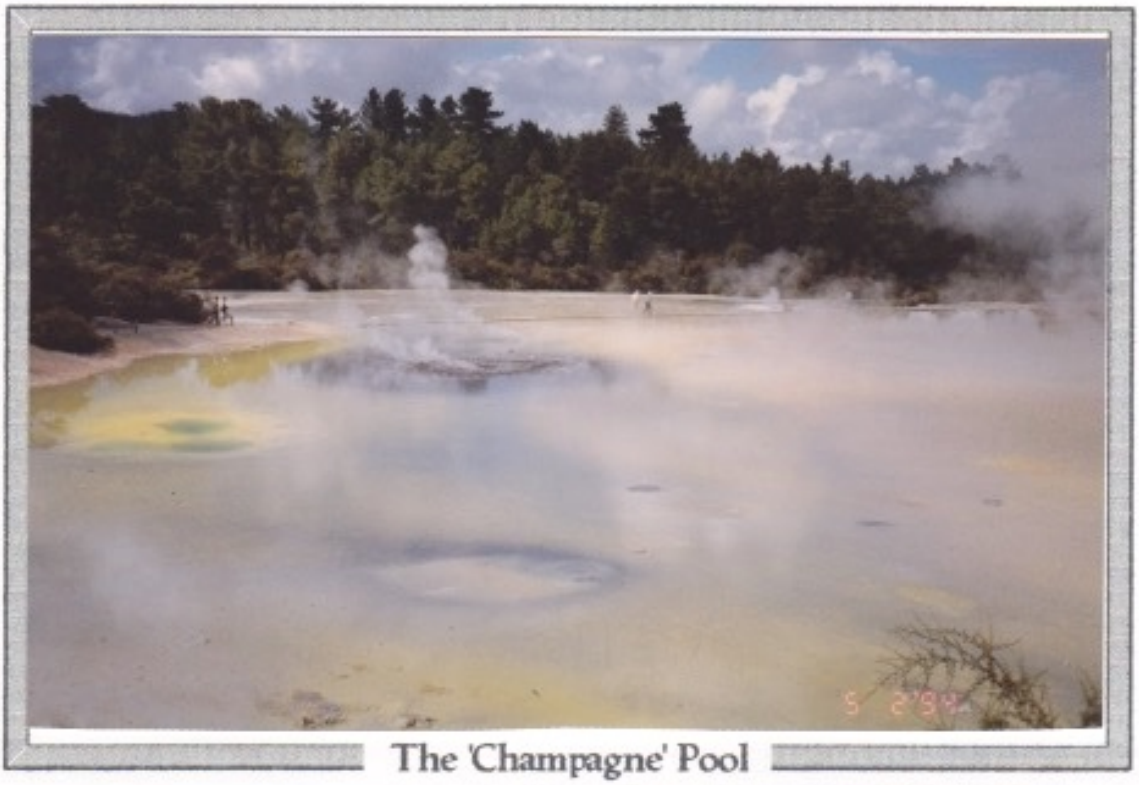
5th February

On to Wai-O-Tapu 'Thermal Wonderland" arriving at 9.45 a.m. just in time for the geyser performance. The 'Lady Knox' geyser is 'the only geyser that can be relied upon to give a display at 10.15 a.m. daily'. Now that sounded a little suspicious! The party trick is dumping a bag of soap flakes into the geyser opening. This disperses an upper layer of water in the geyser reservoir and allows the super-heated steam and water from deep down to erupt in a jet. Lady Knox performed for us, erupting for a few minutes.

The rest of this thermal area was much more impressive than Whakarewarewa - cascades of water, tinted 'terraces', craters, colourful mineral deposits. One could feel the heat of the steam emerging from crevices.

The apparently effervescent 'Champagne Pool' was the final highlight of this visit - a lake of really hot water.





The 'Champagne' Pool

We now continued south to Taupo. It was the Waitangi day weekend and there were junketings in Taupo - mainly centered on power-boat racing around the lake.



Beautiful views of Lake Taupo on the next stretch to Turangi - the 'Parklands Motel'. First impression good, because of the general spaciousness of the grounds, but actually rather neglected, with its unusable pool and tennis court etc.

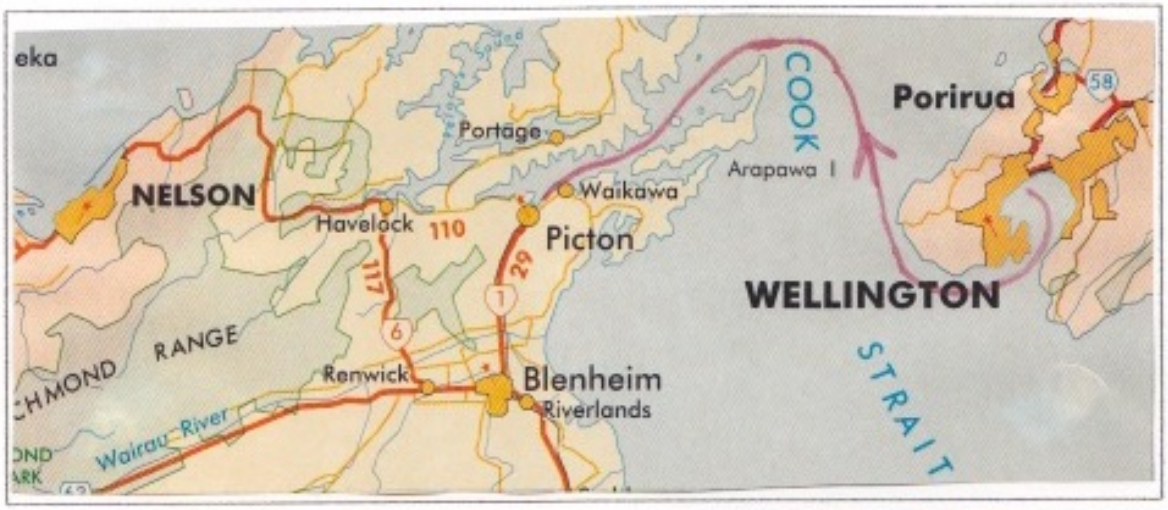
Problems in getting dinner - restaurants fully booked , so had take-away food (which was actually very good). And in New Zealand every motel has coffee-making facilities and provides a complimentary bottle of milk; many have kitchenettes.

6th February

South over the mountains -first through lush vegetation, and then onto the 'Desert Road'. Stopped at Marton to buy lunch and stretch legs in small bird/forest reserve. Then cut across to the coast and found a 'historic site'. We walked along the beach to the wreck of the 'Hyderabad' - an iron sailing ship built in Scotland and wrecked in storms in June 1876. From here to Johnsonville, just outside Wellington and found the 'Burma Motor Inn'. Then a quick look at Wellington - which was clearing up after Waitangi Day. Waitangi Day celebrates the signing of the Treaty with the Maoris in 1840 whereby the British assumed sovereignty over New Zealand; while we were travelling to Wellington, Prince Charles was present at the celebrations at Waitangi itself.

Back to the Motel for a good buffet dinner - off-putting at first to be surrounded by a childrens birthday disco, but actually quite fun to watch!

That was the North Island! Now for our crossing to the South Island on the Inter-Islander.



7th February

To the Inter-Islander ferry terminal at Wellington - pretty chaotic! Lovely weather for this crossing. Looked out for the bank of rosemary (planted by Rosemary Aitken's father many years ago) as we left Wellington, but it was like looking for a needle in a haystack! Talked to another couple - and found that he had been a Gloucester City Council executive.



It was particularly scenic through the channel into Picton where we arrived at 1.30 p.m. Picton was very pretty. We took the 'Queen Charlotte Drive' scenic route to Nelson - extremely winding for 30 km, but very beautiful along the indented coast of the Marlborough Sounds.

We reached Nelson at 5 p.m. and got the last 'room' at the Kings Gate motel - actually a two-room suite. The Renshaws were there as expected - nice to meet them again. Nelson itself a charming small town, but the highlight had really been the scenic journey by ferry and then by car.



Marlborough Sounds



Mitchell's Gully Gold Mine

8th February

Heading for the west coast, our first stop was at Kawatiri Junction - a signposted walk along the track of an old railway. Kawatiri was the end of a line south from Nelson. On to Murchison, a "one horse town" which had been levelled by an earthquake in 1923. This took us into the scenic Buller Gorge which ran through to Westport. This was gold country and we stopped at Mitchell's Gully - old goldmine workings opened as a tourist attraction; but not much effort made to make it interesting - rather a con!

From Westport to Greymouth down the coast - to the Charles Court motel - a bit dowdy, but right on the beach.



Murchison

9th February

Rain all day! First stop at 'Shantytown' - replica of a west coast mining town at the turn of the century. Some contents were anachronistic, but generally well done - so much better than 'Mitchell's Gully.

Wet all the way to Frans Josef - ran from the car park through the puddles to get a quick glimpse and photo of the glacier.

On through the rain to Fox. Motel tourist cabin was a poor choice. We tried to walk to Fox Glacier through the rain but didn't get all the way; recent rock falls had made the walk longer.

Good dinner at the Fox Hotel to make up for the wet day and poor motel! Peppered steak, followed by chocolate crepe, filled with apple and boysenberry, with ice cream and cream; and wine, which was probably forgotten in our bill!



Shantytown



Franz-Josef Glacier

10th February

Along to Lake Matheson car park for a view of the Cook range before leaving Fox. It was a lovely morning, and what we ought to have done was take a flight over the glacier; next time perhaps! Down the coast to Haast, and in to the 'World Heritage Visitor Centre', where the film 'Edge of the Wilderness' was worth seeing. We walked on Haast Beach with not a soul in sight and then returned to the 'World Heritage Hotel' for lunch.

Up to the Haast Pass, first following the wide, flat, stony river valley which had been created by an old glacier. Then we stopped for a walk to the Thunder Creek waterfall before crossing to the east side of the Southern Alps - and leaving the temperate rain forests.

This took us down to Lake Wanaka, then across a narrow neck to Lake Huia - scenic all the way. We reached Wanaka town at the foot of Lake Wanaka to find the motels fullish, but the 'Alpine' motel was o.k.



11th February

This was where we had to head in the direction of Christchurch - we'll have to see Queenstown (for bungy jumping!) and the Milford Sound next time! Fine scenery up and over the Lindis Pass, reaching Lake Pukaki just beyond Twizel. We followed the west side of the lake - fine views of the Mt Cook range all the way to Mount Cook village and the visitor centre.



After a picnic near this lovely spot, we retraced our steps to the foot of the lake, then followed the eastern shore and across to Lake Tekapo. We found the Parkhead motel - advertising itself as '4-star motel, 7-star view'. How right that was! At first sight it looked unimpressive, but our 'suite' was most comfortable; we immediately felt at home. It had a wonderful view over the lake to the mountains. The bookshelf included books on the Mackenzie region by the motel owner, James Maxwell; the walls had pictures by Elizabeth Maxwell and by other local artists.



We walked by the lake to 'Pine Tree Beach' and back. A Japanese camera-crew was photographing the view, together with a carefully placed stuffed deer! Publicity to get even more Japanese tourists! This region has a few New Zealanders, rather more sheep, and even more Japanese tourists by the coach-load.

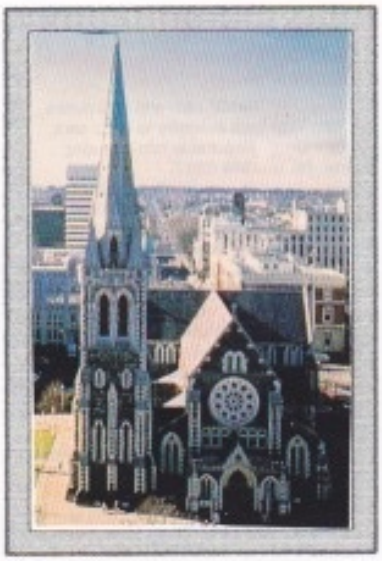


12th February

We were sorry we had to leave Tekapo and this motel, and didn't rush away. We looked in the little "Church of the Good Shepherd" standing on the shore of the lake; the east window is a "picture-window" framing the splendid view. Next to the church is "Mackenzie's dog" - a monument to the sheep-dogs of the Mackenzie region; it is called the Mackenzie region after the cattle thief who found his way into the huge basin while fleeing from the law.

Our drive to Christchurch took us up over Burke's Pass. We were still in the "high country" for some time, with extensive views. The town of Fairlie was fairly dull. We stopped briefly at Geraldine, then joined Highway 1 near Ashburton. For the first time in New Zealand the drive became boring - mile after mile of straight road on the coastal plain almost into Christchurch.

We had time to spare to look at Christchurch - the cathedral square, and the river Avon. Just like an English cathedral city or university town - punting on the river (though the occupants of this punt were Japanese).





Off to the airport, only to discover that the flight was delayed; however this gave us time to visit the International Antarctic Centre - well worth the visit.

The NZ flight was in fact operated by Qantas. It left quite late, the food was so-so, and the video magazine programme was rather boring. Picking up the car at Sydney and driving to the Airport International Motor Inn was easy.

New Zealand had been lovely. It was not only the grand scenery, but also the peacefulness. The quiet little towns are more like England used to be! The roads are so free of traffic - so free that we almost never had to give way on any of the large number of one-way bridges on the main roads. If we did see a car, then it was quite likely to be a well kept 'vintage' British car, like a Hillman Avenger, or an Austin 1100.

And apart from the day on the west coast the weather had been excellent, especially for the Cook Strait crossing, and for our time in the Mount Cook region.

We'd like to go back!

STAGE FOUR - AUSTRALIA

AUSTRALIA

See the Sights:-

the Bridge,



and the Buildings,

the Beach,



Bondi Beach

and the 'Bounders'.



STAGE FOUR - AUSTRALIA

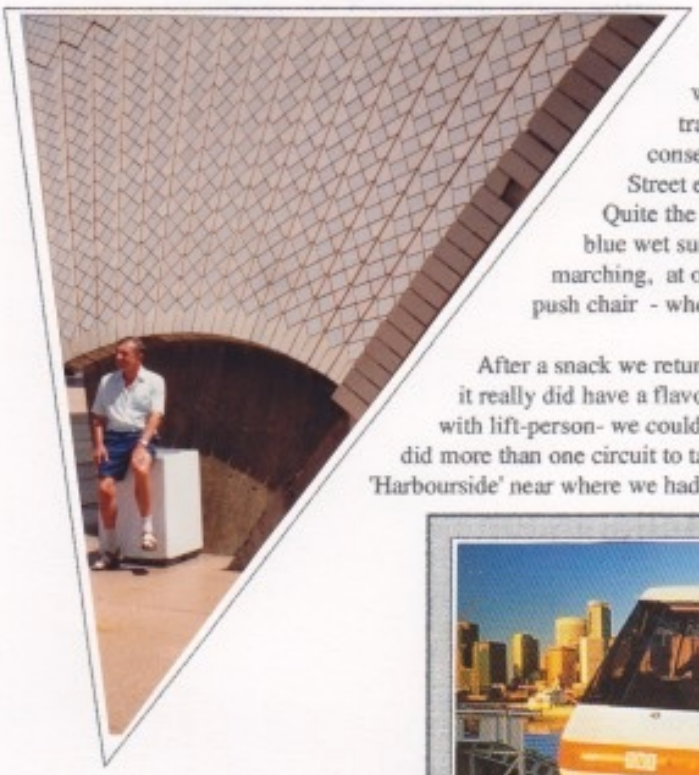
13 th February

This was a Sunday - an excellent day to go into Sydney. There wasn't much traffic as we drove to the centre, and we parked easily on the street near Darling Harbour. It was a longish walk, but an interesting one, across Pyrmont Bridge, along to George Street, down towards the Harbour Bridge, and then across to the Circular Quay. It was then nearly 10.00 - time to join the "Captain Cook Coffee Cruise". This gave us unforgettable views of the Bridge and the Opera House soon after we left the quayside. As the city centre receded we headed towards the harbour entrance - "The Heads", passing waterfront houses which would cost a small fortune!



From "The Heads" we turned into the "Middle Harbour", just about reaching the limits of built-up Sydney before turning about and returning, this time near the northern shore, to the Circular Quay. A marvellous trip, lasting just over two hours.





We then walked up to and around the Opera House - inspecting 'the sails'! After this we walked around the 'Rocks' area - the heart of old Sydney, built by convict work-gangs (perhaps including the Cawsey who was transported for stealing a loaf of bread?). This is now a conservation area and a 'centre of history and entertainment'. Street entertainment was in full swing around the craft market . Quite the most extraordinary were the three men dressed in powder blue wet suits, crowned by a shark's fin. Their act was chanting and marching, at one stage building their act around Japanese twins in a push chair - who never woke up!

After a snack we returned up George Street and went into Grace Brothers store; it really did have a flavour of 'Are you being served', with the most antique lift - with lift-person- we could remember seeing. At 'City Centre' we took the monorail, did more than one circuit to take in the exceptional view of the city, and then got off at 'Harbourside' near where we had parked.



We then drove to Bondi Beach. Being a Sunday the traffic along the beach road was heavy, but we parked eventually and walked Bondi Beach from end to end.



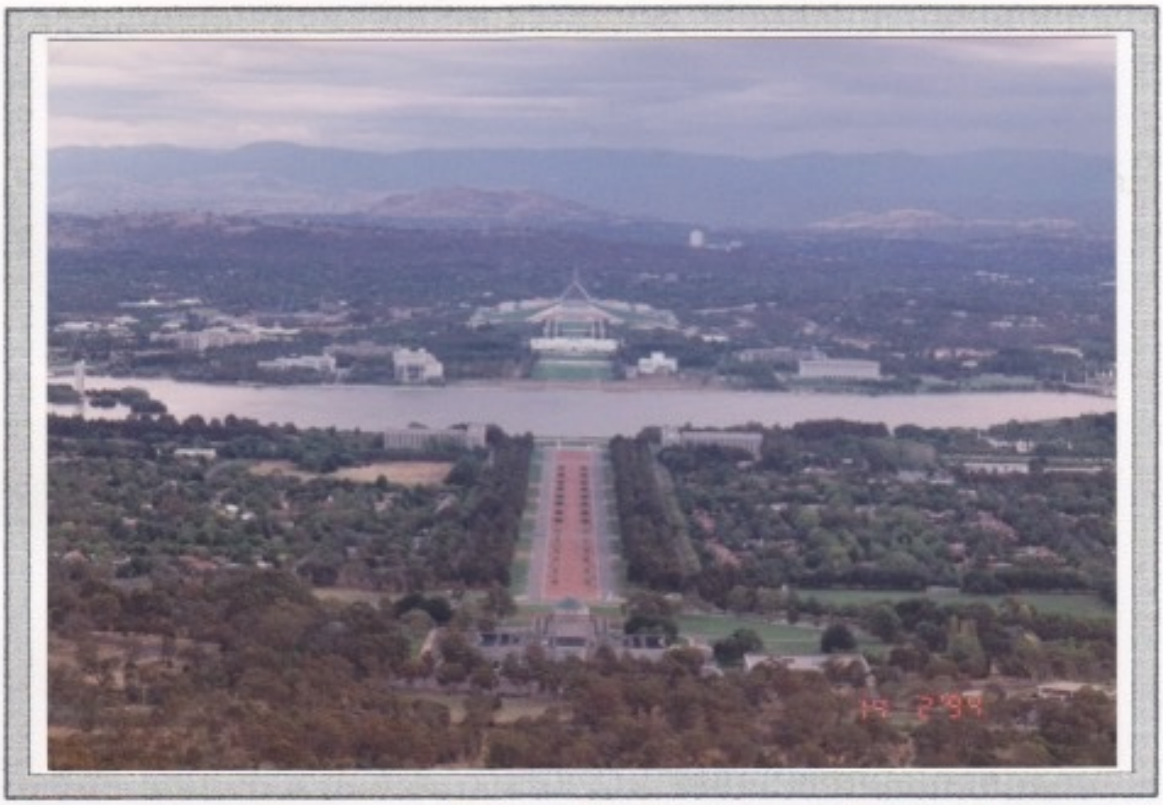
The journey from Bondi back to the motel was a bit awkward, since all the roads seem to go north-south or east-west, and we wanted to go south-west. We got back eventually and ended a marvellous day with a really good dinner.

14th February

On our way to Canberra now to stay with Chris and Gwen Norwood. We headed south out of Sydney on the Prince's Highway and then turned off into the Royal National Park - ravaged by the recent forest fires. Though 90% of this huge area was burnt out, it still had a sort of beauty and there were signs of recovery everywhere - burnt trees sprouting new shoots from the lower trunk. Beyond the Park we stumbled upon an incredible Hindu Temple under construction, and then continued along the coast road, stopping for a while at one fine beach where there was surfing going on.

We avoided Wollongong, the big industrial city, and continued to Kiama for a lunch stop. It was then time to head for Canberra. The first stretch was on the Illawarra Highway over the Macquarie Pass - scenic but slow. Beyond Moss Vale we joined the main Hume Highway from Sydney and then made fast progress. The Federal Highway took us over the Great Divide, past Lake George, and into the Australian Capital Territory and Canberra itself. We found Ferdinand Street easily - and immediately felt very welcome.

Chris gave us a first view of Canberra; the splendid view from the top of Mount Ainslie, just behind their house whetted our appetite for seeing the sights tomorrow. From Mount Ainslie one looks straight over the War Memorial, down Anzac Avenue, and across Lake Burley Griffin, to Capital Hill. On Capital Hill the striking new Parliament House stands behind the original 'temporary' buildings. The Carillon presented by the British Government can be seen rising from the Lake.



15th February

A splendid day seeing the sights of Canberra with Chris and Gwen. This started at Parliament House where we joined an interesting guided tour of this impressive building (a billion dollar cause célèbre!). Clearly no expense was spared in every aspect of the building, from the choice of materials to the carefully graded colour schemes in the debating chambers.

From Parliament we went on to the Supreme Court, a much less attractive building - but nevertheless it was interesting to go into the court rooms (all empty at the time).





Outside Parliament

Our net stop was in the National Gallery; like the one in Ottawa, this contained examples of 'Modern Art' which were ludicrous! Surely one can only laugh at the blank wall above the caption on the right (which I was taken to task for photographing with a flash!); and at the next exhibit: a glass of water on a shelf, labelled 'Oak Tree'.



We lunched at the Gallery and then went on to Tidbinbilla south of Canberra. First stop was the Space Communication Complex, Australia's contribution to the NASA world-wide tracking system. The station's pride and joy is the huge 70 metre dish used for the Voyager 2 encounter with Neptune; the moving structure weighs some 2000 tons.

In complete contrast, we then went to the nearby reserve - an entirely natural, though fenced, area. We were delighted to walk among Red Kangaroos, Eastern Greys and Swamp Wallabies. Next was Koala spotting! We eventually saw a total of six; it needed sharp eyes, assisted by the Ranger's map which indicated the likely places to find them.



After leaving the reserve we actually saw a gang of wild kangaroos in the open. Then it was back to Canberra.

We ate in the 'Canberra Club' - and played a few games of snooker (not very skilfully).





16 th February

We all walked to the top of Mount Ainslie after breakfast - quite a climb. We said our farewells and left Canberra at about noon and retraced our steps to Goulburn. We then took the cross-country route due north to Oberon, using a long stretch of dirt road - the main road via Sydney would have been a much longer route to the Blue Mountains area. This brought us on to the 'Great Western Highway'just west of the Blue Mountains - the barrier west of Sydney which seemed insurmountable to the early settlers. We stopped that night at the 'High Mountains' motor inn in Blackheath.

17th February

The National Park visitor centre was just down the road - but the displays were rather tired. On to Govett's Leap - with the mist rolling in, so absolutely no view! Back through Blackheath and down into the Megalong Valley. The weather was much better on this south side of the ridge and the descent was quite impressive. Returning we stopped at 'Coachman's Glen'. The jungly walk was pretty. On to Katoomba, the best known place in the Blue Mountains.

Katoomba was very touristy with lots of coach-loads of Japanese. After a look at the view from Echo Point we took the cliff-railway - but this was more of a fair-ground ride than a scenic experience! We had had enough of Katoomba and drove on to Leura - for a lunch of 'melts' in the tiniest imaginable bakery cafe; they certainly didn't cater for tourist coaches there! On to Wentworth Falls for the best scenery of all - the sheer vertical cliffs with scenic look-outs.

Finally we headed back to Sydney through busy traffic with some jams. Back to the 'Airport International' again. We walked by the Cook River and then had another of their good dinners - kangaroo fillets, followed by mud cake!

18th February



We flew to Cairns with Ansett, arriving in a tropical rainstorm. We took a taxi to the 'Tradewinds, Esplanade'. We'd picked the Tradewinds because of the convenience of being right in Cairns, together with its position on the sea front. Our room here was a good one, with balcony looking straight out to sea.

Cairns sea front can't be called beautiful; mud-flats separate the promenade from the sea. This does mean that the bird life is interesting - egrets, herons, tern, Australian pelicans, curlew, colourful rainbow lorikeets etc.



19th February

The weather was fairly uncertain, so we didn't book any of the expensive excursions for today; instead we walked to the pier and just made it on to the 'Terri-too' for the half-day harbour/ everglade cruise. This was a very pleasant, relaxing, cruise and included a basket lunch.



We came back through the Pier market-place shops; one little shop had an incredible range of toy kangaroos, koalas and wombats - hardly room to move. We bought a bumper pack of koalas!

Back to the Tradewinds - and out again soon for a long walk down the Esplanade/promenade. Dinner - as last night- was the 'Taste of France'. Very good, but it is incredible that this is the theme for a full month. We shall certainly want a bit of variety.



20th February

Sunday, and so market day in Kuranda. We'd booked a half day tour and the weather was promising. Coach picked us up at the Tradewinds for the drive up to Kuranda. Driver/guide had plenty of humorous Australian patter - he thought so, anyway. We got to Kuranda at about 12.15.

For the first time in Queensland we had lovely weather! We booked for the Dance Theatre, then browsed in the market until the performance at 1.30. This was a splendid show - quite unlike the Maori show at Rotorua. The aboriginal dances told the story of the hero cast out from the tribe, who defeated the 'hairy man' and returned triumphant. The music of the didgeridoo, the making of fire, and the use of the boomerang, were all cleverly introduced without spoiling the telling of the traditional story.



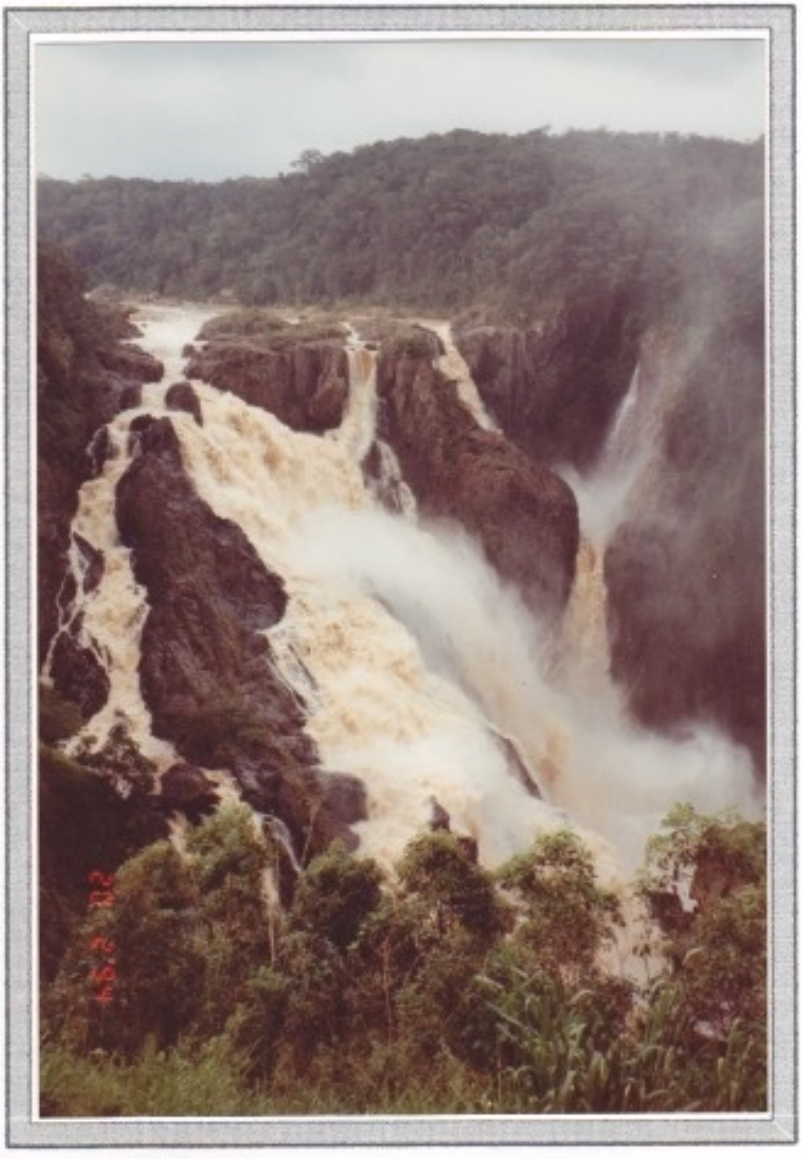
20th February continued

More browsing around the town and market until it was time to go to Kuranda station for the scenic train back to Cairns.

Kuranda stands high up on a jungle-clad mountain escarpment overlooking Cairns. There was no direct route to Kuranda until 1891 when the railway through this difficult terrain was completed. Now that there is a road link, the railway has become a tourist attraction. Kuranda station itself sets the scene for the trip - a platform almost overwhelmed by the tropical ferns and palms.

Much of the descent follows the Barron River gorge, and shortly after leaving Kuranda the train stops at Barron Falls. The compensation for coming to Cairns in the rainy season is that the river and falls are in full spate. The train then continues with spectacular views, with short passages through a total of 15 tunnels. At Stony Creek Falls, the railway crosses the face of the falls by a viaduct. All the time the train is descending, and eventually it emerges from the gorge into the cane plantations on the coastal plain.

On reaching Cairns we walked back to the Tradewinds through the town, rather than taking the excursion coach. We'd had a splendid day, and except for a few showers during the last part of the rail journey the weather had been lovely.



21st February



We had been wondering whether to take one of the full day, expensive, trips to the Outer Reef. But we'd enjoyed our half day trips so far, the weather was always changeable, and we had seen some good coral at Fiji. Furthermore we didn't want to Snorkel. So we decided to take the modest half-day trip to Green Island, on the Reef but not so far off shore as the Outer Reef areas.

We took the 'Reef Jet' catamaran for the fast journey of an hour or so to Green Island and on arrival we joined the 'Yellow Submarine' , a so-called semi-submersible viewer. This didn't really mean that it was a 'submarine', or that it submerged in any way - just that one sat below water level, with glass windows on both sides.



Coral viewing here was not so colourful as at Fiji, and one wasn't as close to the coral. However there were more shoals of colourful fish, including some which accompanied the boat throughout the trip.

Back at Green Island we walked into the 'resort', and took the organised 'nature walk' around this rather organised island. Time after this for an ice-cream before rejoining the Reef Jet for the journey back to Cairns through some rain storms. We'd been lucky; lovely weather on the island while it had been raining at Cairns, and dry weather at Cairns when we got back.

We packed to leave Australia tomorrow, then went to the 'Steakhouse' in Cairns for dinner.

Goodbye Australia! Our days in Sydney and Canberra - and our time with the Norwoods - had been real highlights of our holiday. And we had seen some interesting and memorable sights from Cairns. But we didn't leave with a feeling that we would make a special journey back to see more of the sights of Australia; it lacked the charm and relative compactness of New Zealand. Perhaps we shouldn't draw conclusions like this when we actually only saw the tiniest corners of this huge continent!

STAGE FIVE - BALI



Images of Bali





STAGE FIVE - BALI

22nd February

Unexpectedly, our Garuda flight to Bali was the best of the whole trip! We could spread ourselves because it was so empty; we had some nice views of the Indonesian islands; and we arrived a little early. What a splendid start to a trip to the 'Paradise Island', we thought! It didn't last! We had paid for transfers and expected to be met at the airport. So we wheeled our luggage out of the terminal. Two uninvited 'porters' put a hand on our luggage and guided us towards the Sanur Beach hotel bus - which at that time we thought was meeting us. We insisted that we should not pay for transport (or for the porter's 'services'), but we ended up signing a voucher. What a hassle! We didn't realise what Bali was going to be like.



Soon after reaching the hotel 'Made' from the agent, Pacto, arrived to apologise for not meeting us - and assured us that the hotel's voucher would be paid by them.

This was a lavishly appointed hotel with two splendid swimming pools - the huge one close to our room being the finest pool we have ever seen. We walked from the hotel past the statue by the entrance - clad in a check pattern cloth! Why? We were to see these modesty garments (?) everywhere we went - apparently to humanise the statues. Beyond the gate we came to Sanur Beach Street - and the reality of Bali's tourist areas. We were continuously accosted by taxi-drivers, hawkers selling fake watches, shop-keepers inviting us to enter their shops. It just increased our sales resistance, and we felt harassed.

We returned to the shelter of the hotel - and then the rains came! However a good meal (rijstaffel) in the 'East-West' restaurant raised our spirits. But we retired that night suffering culture shock. Was all south-east Asia going to be like this for the next three weeks of our holiday?

23rd February

The outlook improved today! Walking out at 6.30 a.m. revealed a different Sanur, with no hawkers and other pests - just people going about their business. And the sun shone all day. We had breakfast at a small cafe across the road rather than paying inflated hotel prices. For little more than £1 we had a very good 'continental' breakfast. After this we had a relaxing day by the pool and sea - a lovely 'lagoon' beach with calm, clear water, sheltered by a reef.



23rd February continued

Wednesday evening was the time for the Ramayana Ballet performance at the hotel, preceded by a splendid buffet dinner. The performance was started by the 'gamelan gong orchestra'.



The lavishly costumed dancing then told a traditional story - the kidnapping of a young princess, Sita, and the rescue by her husband, Rama, helped by the eagle and the monkeys.



24th February

Another early walk revealed more of the contrasts of Bali. Only a few hundred yards from the sophisticated hotel and the tourist-dedicated street was a 'native' area of shacks among the palm trees, and beyond this was entirely rural.

We had breakfast across the road again, and then, at 8.45, we were picked up by 'Wayan' , another Pacto rep, together with a driver, for our 'private' tour of the island. ('Wayan' is the traditional Balinese name for the first son; 'Made' is the second)



24th February continued



It wasn't the ideal way to see everything - the two of us in the back of the small minibus with a restricted view anyway, and with Wayan and the driver in front. We bustled along the busy roads getting an impression of hyperactivity! Busy narrow roads with weaving vehicles; busy people working at their crafts in the open air. And a background of houses, with every house looking like a mini-temple with an individual shrine; every statue and many stone pillars bedecked in the check skirt; many little dishes by the wayside containing today's offering to the gods.



Batubulan was our first stop for the Barong dance. This enacted the eternal fight between good and evil represented by the Barong and the Rangda, mythological animals.

On to the village of Celuk, where the whole village specialises in silver work. In to a silver workshop set up for the tourists! We quickly passed along a row of craftsmen doing finely detailed work, and were then ushered into the showroom. We really didn't intend buying anything, but emerged with a silver brooch; this was 'fixed price' - so we were told.

This 'commercial' part of the trip continued with a visit to the wood carvers at Mas. Again a row of craftsmen outside; a showroom beyond containing an amazing range of carved artefacts.

We were told by Wayan that this was where we should bargain; we didn't do it very well - our offer of $40 US for a $75 piece was accepted too readily. But it is a nice souvenir and a real example of the craftsmanship of Mas.





Lake Batur from Kintamani

24th February continued

From Mas we went to a temple near Tampaksiring. This was quiet, but not that interesting - a discovered ruin. Continued north for an hour or so to Kintamani for the spectacular mountain views. We were delivered to a lunch stop - ushered into a tourist restaurant for a meal we didn't want. So we just had a drink there, and bought some bananas at a stall; the bananas here are so much sweeter and more flavourful than those we have at home. Views at Kintamani were certainly spectacular, but most of our energy was needed to swat away the hawkers!



The return journey took us through pretty rural areas with very scenic rice terraces. There was noone to be seen! We stopped to get out, admire the view, and take photographs. Within seconds we were surrounded by a swarm of hawkers who had appeared from nowhere - women and children thrusting carved objects at us. We lost our sales resistance and ended up with some items which cost very little - a pair of ugly statuettes, and two small boxes.



Next came a visit to another temple. Here we needed to wear 'temple sashes' for the entry, though perhaps these were no more than a tourist entrance ticket. This was rather more interesting than the first temple, but still less spectacular than we would have expected. The state of the toilets at this tourist venue was indescribable; others in Bali were not much better!

At Ubud we decided to go to the 'monkey forest' and fed the clamouring monkeys. Then back to the hotel after a day which was full of experiences despite its imperfections!

25th February

We had the hotel breakfast buffet today - a quite exceptional buffet, though far more expensive than going to one of the outside restaurants. But we shouldn't need lunch after that! We also needed a bit of exercise to shake it down. How about table-tennis by the beach - free, according to our activities leaflet. We played for twenty minutes or so and were then accosted by an attendant asking us to sign for the 70p charge - the leaflet is out of date! How petty for an expensive hotel to levy these footling charges! We refused to pay, and stopped playing - went for a swim instead as the morning got wetter.



The rain stopped for a while in the early afternoon and we went for a walk in Sanur. The roads are all in a pretty poor state and pedestrians, cars, and motor cyclists have to compete in avoiding the potholes! And that seemed to be the case everywhere we went. So it was a surprise to see road repair work in progress; and incredible to see the line of coolies transporting the grit in small trays on their heads. No machinery, or even wheel-barrows; just job creation.

More steady rain until the evening. We went out for dinner - this time to the 'Balita' further down the street. Excellent value! As we ate, we watched the activity in the street - but it seemed that almost every time we looked up, one hawker selling toy marionette ducks and geese started his 'act' for our benefit; free entertainment, and far more interesting than the general run of watches, T-shirts, and so on. So when we left the restaurant we bought a chicken and a duck, not expecting them to work as well as the 'display' models; to our surprise, they do!

26th February

We swam before breakfast, and then had the buffet again; then a long walk along the beach. Swimming again, and then it was time to leave (1.00 p.m.). The hotel tried to charge us for the incoming transfer from the airport - which Pacto obviously hadn't sorted out. This time we had a different Pacto rep who sorted it out. The Garuda flight left for Singapore on time - another good flight.



Bali had been an 'experience'. The Sanur Beach hotel was excellent, and the situation almost perfect - a good beach as well as the outstanding pools, and 'real' Bali within a short walk; this probably wouldn't be true of the big resort area at Nusa Dua. We were glad to have taken the trip to the craft villages and to Kintamani - opening our eyes to this utterly different culture, so strongly influenced by the religious beliefs. The gods must constantly be appeased; every house has a shrine for the offerings of flowers, rice, and incense in a small basket; and similar offerings appear by the road-side, on taxi dash-boards, on the beach, by the swimming-pool machinery, and so on. This is Balinese Hinduism with its superstition and its emphasis on the balancing of good and evil.

Bali is a lovely place - but three days was enough. The hassle from the hawkers was too tiresome - on the beach, on the local street, and everywhere on the tour of the island. We really didn't see the view at Kintamani properly because of the hawkers.

So I don't think we will return to Bali, even though we treasure the experience.

STAGE SIX - SINGAPORE AND MALAYSIA





PENANG
4th to 8th March

CAMERON HIGHLANDS
2nd to 4th March

(Car)



KUALA LUMPUR
1st to 2nd March

(Rail)

SINGAPORE
26th Feb to 1st March



STAGE SIX - SINGAPORE AND MALAYSIA

We arrived in Singapore in the evening of 26th February and were soon at the Boulevard hotel, amongst the glitter of Orchard Road, the 'Oxford Street' of Singapore.

27th February

We walked round Colonial Singapore today.





Singapore - the blend of old and new



Singapore Underground - MRT Entrance

It was interesting to see this wealthy, clean, well-organised city, and to travel on the extremely modern and efficient MRT (Mass Rapid Transit - underground) system, but we really found the city relatively characterless; the old parts - like Chinatown, the Colonial area, the Raffles Hotel, the Cathedral - are overwhelmed by the skyscrapers, and the building sites for yet more skyscrapers.



Singapore waterfront



The 'Merlion'

27th February continued

Yet even in busy Singapore some people still have time for relaxation -



The characteristics of Singapore prompt many questions. How is it that Singapore can be so clean, tidy and efficient? - contrasting so strongly with our experiences in Bali. Why is there no graffiti? How is it that the traffic flows so smoothly with few traffic jams that we were aware of ?

One answer is that, we gathered, vandals are heavily punished. Hawkers must be licensed and must conform to stringent health requirements. And there are laws covering all aspects of life - including mandatory flushing of toilets with penalties for non-compliance.

Of course the wealth of Singapore makes a tremendous difference, compared with the relative poverty of Indonesia.

The evening was the highlight of the day. We were picked up by the Wangs at 7.00. First stop was for drinks in the 'Compass Rose' on the 74th floor of the 'Westin' tower just next to the Raffles hotel. It was twilight, and the city views on all sides were spectacular. Then on to the Chinese restaurant (a very good one) in the Hyatt Regency off Orchard Road. The piece de resistance was the beautifully presented and prepared lobster. Chopsticks were the order of the day!

We invited them back to the Boulevard for coffee and sat in the lounge at the bottom of the spectacular atrium in our hotel.

Clearly the Wangs are prospering in the Singapore environment; he has his own business, and she obviously has a very good job. They told us a good deal about life in Singapore; a reason why the traffic flows so smoothly in this congested city is that the Singapore Government makes it extremely expensive to purchase the privilege of owning a car.

We'd thought of going to Tang Dynasty City tomorrow; they discouraged us - a poor representation of the 'real' China!



28th February

Sentosa is an island south of Singapore separated by a ¼ mile stretch of water. It has become a 'playground' for Singapore with a variety of attractions. We chose to go there by the cable-car ride from the top of the World Trade Centre Building across to the terminal on Sentosa. This gave splendid views of the harbour area.

This was a Monday, and Sentosa was quiet; these were some visitors dressing up in traditional costumes for photographs.





Sentosa Cable Car

We walked through various well tended ornamental gardens to the beach area - clean, empty, beaches looking out onto the shipping of Singapore. We continued walking along the coast to the aquarium - a marvellous display of tropical fish there, finely displayed. We ended our visit to Sentosa by taking the monorail and then returning to the World Trade Centre by the cable-car.



Sentosa Monorail



Aboard the "Cheng Ho"

It was time to go to Clifford Pier for the 'Imperial' cruise on the M.V. Cheng Ho (picture next page), claimed to be an exact replica of a famous Imperial vessel of the Ming Dynasty. It certainly was an extraordinary vessel, rather like a floating Chinese palace lavishly ornamented with traditional Chinese symbols to keep evil spirits at bay and ensure divine protection to all those who sail in her! (and air-conditioned to keep them cool!)

Our cruise left Clifford Pier at 3 p.m., passed in front of the 'Merlion' (picture two pages back), near the spot where Stamford Raffles stepped ashore to found Singapore, and then out of the harbour entrance. The route took us among the vast array of merchant shipping anchored in the sraits, along the south side of Sentosa, with receding views of the Singapore city skyline of skyscrapers. To the south were the Indonesian islands.



M.V. "Cheng Ho"



Kusu Island



28th February continued

This was followed by an island stop - on Kusu (or turtle) island. A feature of this island is the Chinese temple - but otherwise it was a fairly ordinary little island.
We returned to the Cheng Ho which took us back to Clifford Pier; the MRT then took us back to Orchard Road and the hotel.

We would be leaving Singapore in the morning. Today had been a good day. (We've had no rain in Singapore) We have seen what we wanted to see, and gained our impressions of this city - a predominantly 'western' city in many ways, where English is the language of business and commerce and where the fast food outlets would make any American feel at home. Singapore is a natural place for a break on the way to Australia or New Zealand, but if we were to do a trip like this again we would try to stop somewhere else.

1st March

We left Singapore on the 7.30 a.m. train for Kuala Lumpur - and soon realised what a good decision it had been to go by rail. The air-conditioned train was extremely comfortable (first-class was not expensive). We crossed Singapore island, then crossed the strait to Johore on the causeway - beside us was the dense road traffic queuing up to enter Singapore.

From Johore we headed into the heart of Malaysia through huge cultivated plantations - palms, rubber trees, coffee, pineapple, and other exotica. Agriculture gave way to jungle, with kampong villages.

The train gave us a marvellous close-up view, travelling through jungle, plantations, small towns and villages, right by people's back-yards, providing an arm-chair travelogue of life as it is lived in rural Malaysia.

Nearing Kuala Lumpur massive works were going on to modernise the railway. We arrived at Kuala Lumpur at about 2 p.m. and took a taxi to the Ming Court hotel.



We had a short while to see Kuala Lumpur and went out at 3.30. First stop was Petaling Street in Chinatown. This was a really fascinating area - with all the vibrancy which was missing from the Singapore Chinatown. Petaling Street was packed with stalls on either side of the street, and shops almost hidden behind them. Buttons? - go to the 'button shop' across the road; sure enough there is a shop lined with little drawers containing every kind of button. T-Shirts? - much easier; almost every other stall sells T-shirts (mainly 'fake' designer labels) where you haggle over the price. Food? - lots of choice, ingredients or ready-to-eat; but hardly the kind of thing we find in Tescos!



1st March continued

From Chinatown we walked past the Sri Mariamman Hindu temple, highly decorated with hundreds of figures; then through the Central Market and on to the Sultan Abdul Samad Building, the original home of Colonial Government. Merdeka Square, where the Union Jack was finally lowered in 1957 was immediately opposite.

Then we walked past the Majid Jame Mosque, nestled among the high buildings of modern Kuala Lumpur at the confluence of the Kelang and Gombak rivers - the birthplace of Kuala Lumpur.

We were ready to get back to the hotel, but we hadn't reckoned with the rush hour problems. We got a taxi after 15 minutes or so, sharing with someone who wanted to go to Chinatown. Getting to Chinatown was the easy part; from there to the Ming Court hotel, no more than four miles or so, took about an hour and a half through the horrendous traffic jams of Kuala Lumpur! But in spite of this, the expedition into the city had been a worth while experience.

Kuala Lumpur was a fascinating city, with its life of many cultures - mosques, Hindu and Buddhist temples, and Christian churches of all sorts. It was full of life and character, and not obviously 'tourist-aware'.

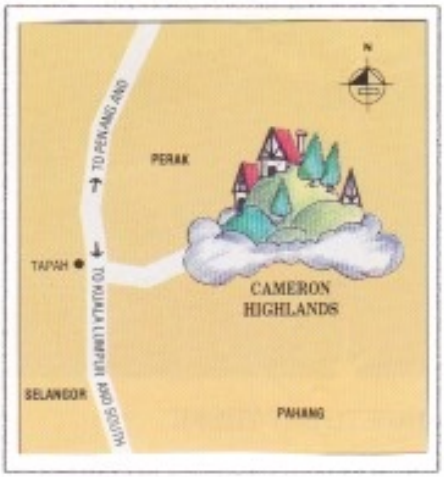


Sultan Abdul Samad Building



Majid Jame Mosque

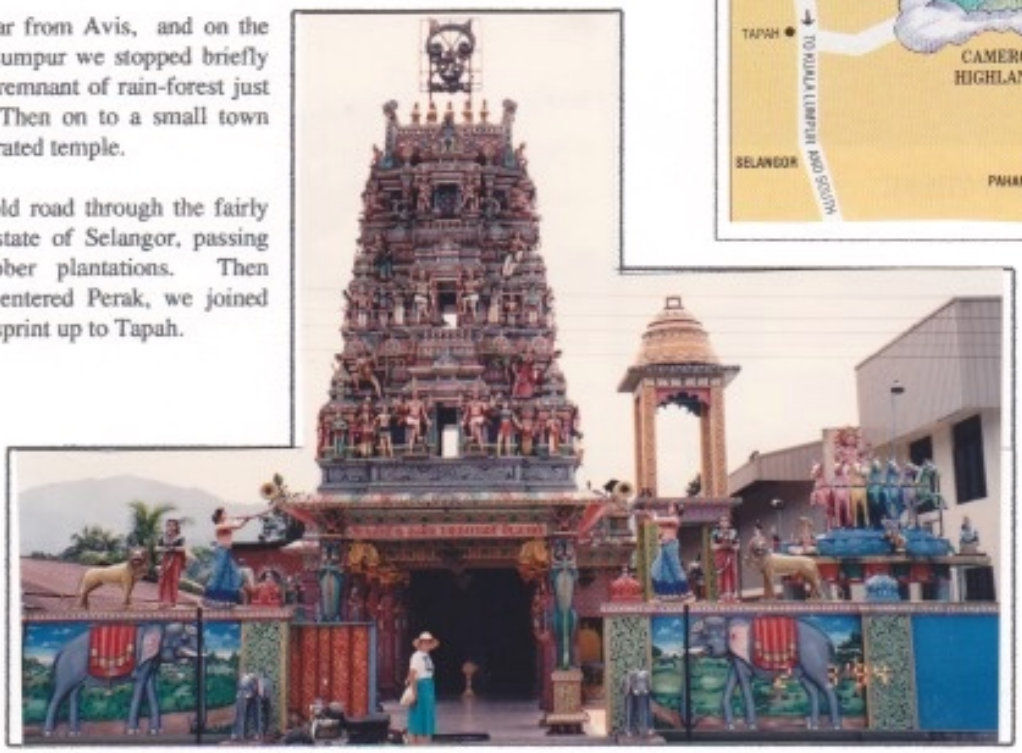
2nd March



Today we set off for the Cameron Highlands, the 'Hill Resort' over 1500 metres above sea level amongst the peaks of the main mountain range of peninsular Malaysia. A British surveyor, William Cameron, discovered the area in 1885 and it was settled by 19th century tea-planters and Chinese market-gardeners. British colonial civil servants then sought a cool rural retreat, and created a corner of rural England in Asia!

We collected our car from Avis, and on the way out of Kuala Lumpur we stopped briefly at Templer Park, a remnant of rain-forest just north of the city. Then on to a small town with its highly decorated temple.

We stayed on the old road through the fairly densely populated state of Selangor, passing through many rubber plantations. Then roughly where we entered Perak, we joined the motorway for a sprint up to Tapah.



The Cameron Highlands road from Tapah soon begins to wind its way up into the hills - a scenic drive all the way. After an hour or so one enters the Cameron Highlands area at Ringlet, but the main 'Hill Resort' area is half-an-hour further on at Tanah Rata. Our hotel, the 'Strawberry Park' was higher still - the 'resort above all others'.

What a difference to be back in a cool, 'English' climate after the tropical heat at sea level! We actually needed our jerseys for an early morning stroll! No need for air-conditioners here, either; it was a pleasure to have open windows.

Though the hotel was rather empty, there were three restaurants to choose from for dinner. We went to the 'grill-room'; the highlight was the 'strawberry crepes' prepared at the table, flamed with liqueur! As we left, the entertainers were singing to an empty room in the bar outside.



3rd March

After a good buffet breakfast we set out for the day. First a little browsing along the Tanah Rata shops, followed by a walk to the 'Robinson' waterfall. After this a short visit to the 'Parit' waterfall with its eastern-style bridge across it. All pretty scenery, though not spectacular.

On we went to the 'Sam Poh' Buddhist temple - large and colourful, containing a large Buddha and other images.

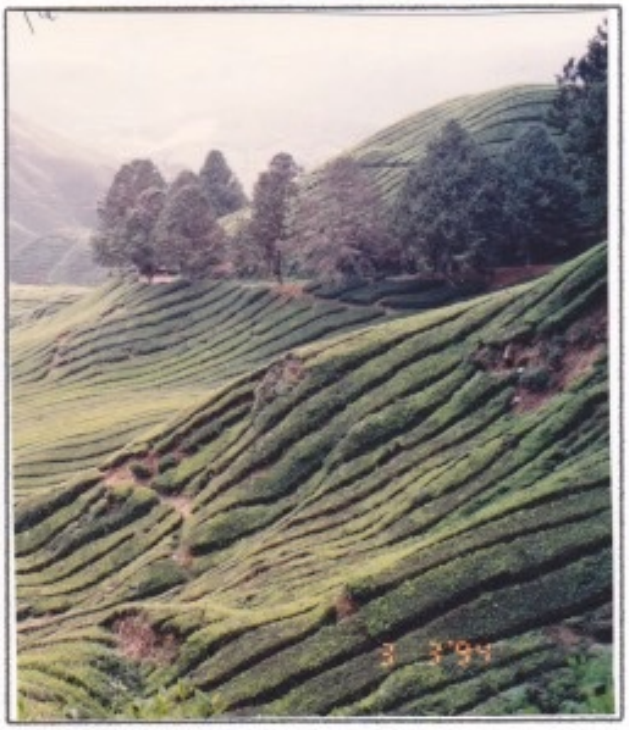




We then continued to the next small town of Brinchang and had Malaysian style lunch - 'Nasi Goreng' and 'Fried Mee'. Then to the 'Butterfly Farm' - poorly maintained, but many of the spectacular Rajah Brooke butterflies there.



Then to the 'Green Cow' area, with fine views of the tea plantations, overflowing onto every bit of available land; one realised that the hand-picking made this possible. On up to the top of the Gunang Brinchang mountain via a narrow winding road.



But as interesting as all these 'places of interest' was the life in-between - people, restaurants, shops, farms, etc.

4th March

We set out for Penang at 9.15 a.m.; so scenic that we didn't mind retracing our route to Tapah. We took the motorway beyond Ipoh, and then returned to the old road through Chenar to Kuala Kangar, where we stopped for a break. But the 'tandas' (lavatories) we found were locked! We asked, and were directed to some others, also locked! Back to the car, and onto the motorway to find a service area.. It's all so new that all the rest areas are under construction, but fortunately they do have temporary tandas! It was fine scenery from here, through rocky gorges and past Kampong villages. Approaching Butterworth the rain began, and by the time we reached the long Penang Bridge it was torrential. Continuing around the outskirts of Georgetown we passed the State Mosque with its impressive golden domes before following the north coast of Penang Island to Batu Ferringhi. It was still pouring down when we reached the Casuarina.



Penang Bridge



State Mosque

We didn't like the first room we were offered because of the poor view over the bar/restaurant roof. It was easily changed, and the new room gave a nice view of the garden and beach (see below). The hotel is good, but the pool seemed so small compared with the huge one at the Sanur Beach!



We walked along the road through Batu Ferringhi and found a restaurant for dinner. Batu Ferringhi itself is not very exciting - a resort strip which one wouldn't make a journey to see! Every other shop sells T-shirts, and the ones in between are restaurants.

5th March

Sunny this morning and we walked on this fine beach before buffet breakfast. It was never too hot, and we enjoyed the morning in the garden and on the beach. Mid-afternoon we drove a short distance to the Penang Butterfly Farm, a very well organised attraction which knocked spots off the poor affair at the Cameron Highlands. The exit from the insect rooms led to an art gallery and an antique shop crammed full of artefacts. On then to the Forestry Museum nearby; striking architecture, and interesting exhibits, but what we noticed particularly was the rotting parquet floor - in a forestry museum!

We had the 'special' dinner at the hotel - a barbecue/buffet with tables set out around the pool. A Phillippino singing group moved from table to table - but we managed to dodge them by going for second helpings! The food and atmosphere were excellent - at a very reasonable price by hotel standards. We ended the day feeling very satisfied!





6th March

A similar morning, but one special 'activity' - parasailing over the bay, towed by a speedboat. I definitely felt 'high'!



We decided to go to Penang Hill; we went a little astray, but this did mean that we saw a bit of Georgetown; the clock-tower, Fort Cornwallis, and a Chinese funeral procession. We found the funicular station in the end and took a train crowded with locals (it was a Sunday). The train moves slowly up the steep track, with a change of trains halfway up - and at this point the track is colonised by monkeys. At the top we had fine views of Georgetown, the coast and mainland, and Penang Bridge. A storm was threatening, so we returned to the bottom, and back to the hotel.



Tonight's special meal at the hotel was Chinese - apparently the first time they had laid this on, surprisingly. This was nothing like as good as the barbecue; rather spicy soup, prawns, beef, chicken and veg, the last two being rather disappointing.

7th March

Again we spent the morning enjoying the garden, pool, sea, and beach. In the early afternoon we drove out again. First stop was the 'Cultural Centre' where they offered us seats for the 3.15 'show'. We felt it looked a bit like the Rotorua 'Hangi' - a tourist 'cabaret', and so we drove on. Passing the butterfly farm again took us onto the quiet road down the west side of Penang Island. Up and up we went to a high pass - with a well-stocked little shop catering for the sparse passing trade. How did he make a living? Down and down we went back to sea-level. A side road then took us into some very unspoiled parts of rural Penang - native villages in jungles of palm trees.



We returned to the Casuarina for our last night in Malaysia. Again we had the 'special' dinner at the hotel, this time 'Fisherman's Wharf' - almost as good as the barbecue, but sitting inside meant that it didn't have the atmosphere.

8th March

Up early to catch our flight to Bangkok. We drove to the airport in the south of Penang Island. It was dark, and we again got a little lost in Georgetown - yet another look at the clock-tower! However we got to the airport in plenty of time. The flight left on time.

We enjoyed Malaysia. Kuala Lumpur, the Cameron Highlands, and Penang were very different from each other, but each gave a view of a fascinating culture - or a multitude of cultures: the Malay, the Chinese, the Indian, and the Colonial heritage. It is a go-ahead country, prosperous and thriving - an up-and-coming economy whose growth one can almost feel happening. There is much to see, and one can see it as a tourist without feeling hassled or exploited. People are looking after their own business - and 'tourist' spots are not overrun with hawkers; indeed hawkers must be licensed here.

English is a very important language, and we had the Malay English newspaper in each hotel (complimentary); each day's copy was full of indignation about the Sunday Times - the unfounded story of Malayan Government corruption. Ideas of reducing student numbers sent to Britain for 'over-valued, over-priced degrees' were being put about.

We'd like to visit Malaysia again; and we'd certainly try to include more rail travel.

STAGE SEVEN - BANGKOK AND AYUTHAYA



Bangkok - Old and New



Spire at Wat Po



-and at Ayuthaya

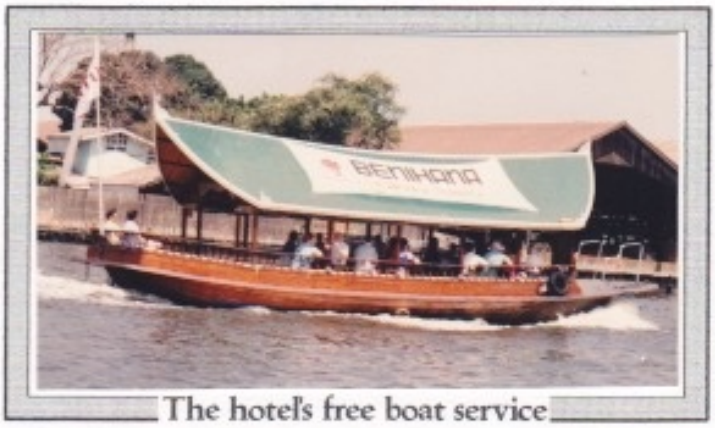
8th March

We'd arranged to be met at Bangkok, and this worked efficiently; we were soon on the way to the hotel - and into Bangkok's notorious traffic jams. We had plenty of time to look at the advertising hoardings - so very foreign in their curious Thai script.

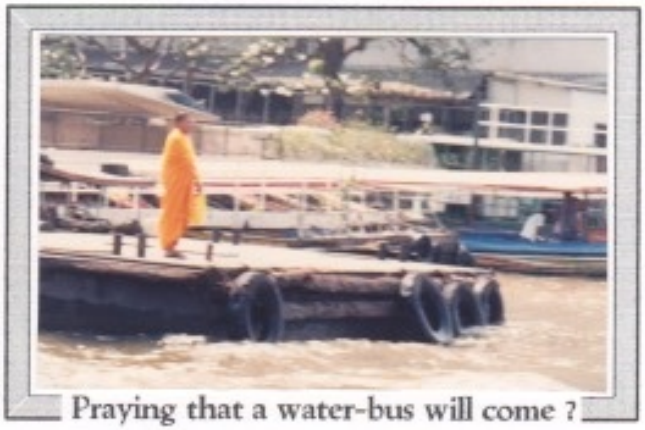
พระพุทธรูปทองคำ สุโขทัยไตรมิตร
วัดไตรมิตรวิทยาราม

On reaching the 'Royal Garden Riverside' we were taken to a room with a 'view' over the hotel's multi-storey car-park. We didn't care for this, and paid a supplement for a much nicer room with a river view.

Off to the city almost immediately using the hotel's free boat service to 'River City' - a 20 minute ride up-river. We were to take this trip a number of times during our stay - always an enjoyable experience with its changing views of Bangkok life on the river itself and on the banks. One forgot the smell after a while! Everyone uses river transport where they can, in order to avoid the terrible traffic jams on the roads of Bangkok.



The hotel's free boat service



Praying that a water-bus will come ?

At 'River City' we decided to head immediately for the Wat Po temple complex, which we knew was further up the river. We knew that there was a fast water-bus service. We got on a likely looking boat and found ourselves crossing the river; this was the free ferry, and we simply took a free ride back again! The water-bus actually used the next pier, but when we got there we were advised/ persuaded to take an express 'private' boat. This was one of the many 'long-tailed' speed-boats (hang yao) which ply for hire. They have a large and completely exposed engine on a swivelled mount and go like a rocket! The ride was an experience! - but one just doesn't have time to see the surroundings as they fly past in a blur! Our boatman dropped us at small pier and indicated that we should head up a narrow alley in the direction of Wat Po.



On a hang yao - long-tailed speed-boat

8th March continued

We were consulting our map when we were accosted by a charming young man who explained that he was a teacher: could he help us? After chatting for a while he urged us to go to the 'Royal Lapidary'; today was a special day, with tax-free sales. He seemed genuine enough, and didn't press us when he realised that we hadn't much interest in buying jewellery.

On to the Wat Po temple complex. a labyrinth of opulent buildings, courtyards, gardens, shrines and statues.



Wat Po

Most of the structures at Wat Po date from the period after 1792; the Burmese had been driven out, Bangkok had become the new capital of Thailand, and King Rama I brought together works of art from the ruins of the former great cities such as Ayuthaya. Wat Po is the home of the 'Reclining Buddha' - more than 50 yards long - a brick and plaster figure, clothed in gold. But the temple complex is also full of life: a school, refreshment-stalls, fortune-telling, massage parlours - and a woman with dozens of tiny wild birds crammed into a tiny cage, with a note attached - "Save Wild Life. Pay me to release a bird". We decided not to encourage this.

After leaving Wat Po we were 'helped' by another young man who said he was a teacher. He led us to a near-by cafe for an orange-juice - and soon told us the same tale about the 'Royal Lapidary' and the bargains to be had there. We were already a little suspicious (having already read about touts who declare themselves to be teachers) but decided that it could be interesting to go to this 'Royal Lapidary' - by ourselves. Our new 'friend' called a 'tuk-tuk' (the little three-wheeler taxis which are everywhere), and the driver dodged in and out of the traffic as only the tuk-tuks and motor-cycles can, and delivered us right into the doorway of the Lapidary.

The instant we were inside a sales-lady attached herself to us, gave us a quick tour of the work-shop, and then took us into the 'shop' - full of beautiful jewellery - with large gem-stones, and no price labels; we politely asked the prices of one or two (expensive) items - but soon moved to the bargain-basement end of the shop, where we bought two pretty gilded pots, and two silk ties.

We got a taxi back to River City. Some time to wait before the next hotel boat, so we window-shopped along the rows of antique shops at River City - fascinating to see the Thai artefacts - so different from the contents of an antique shop at home.

What an extraordinary afternoon; we had only been in Bangkok for a few hours, and had had a range of fascinating experiences of the city!



Feet of the Reclining Buddha



At the 'Royal Lapidary'

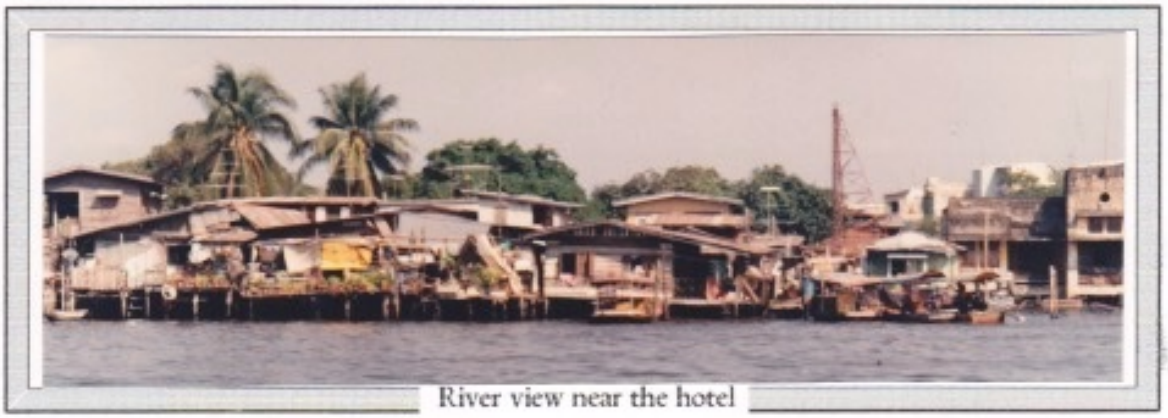
9th March

We started the day with another short outing to River City - shopping; purchases of a silk dress and a silk tie. The dress fitted, so there was no need to have one made in 24 hours. Then back to the hotel for a few hours over the heat of the day - swimming and relaxing in shady areas by the pool. It was too hot for much else that day - 34°C air temperature, and 30°C water temperature in the pool! The Royal Garden Riverside was a very good choice of hotel. In the large garden and pool area one can almost forget that the hotel is in the centre of a big city - a tranquil oasis! And there is always activity to be seen on the river - the fast passenger boats, and the long strings of heavily-laden barges towed by an apparently puny tug-boat.

By the end of the day Kay (unusually) had been knocked out by the heat despite avoiding the direct sun.



Royal Garden Riverside Hotel



River view near the hotel

10th March

A fascinating morning walk from River City (by D; K still recovering from yesterday's heat) . Though River City is a very modern shopping complex, the traditional is not far away. Immediately outside is a small shrine laden with offerings to the gods. And a few yards further on, a lane led to bustling market areas in narrow alleys - mainly selling food. Then onto the traffic-filled Charoen Krung road, lined with open-fronted shops interspersed with little engineering workshops, all spilling onto the pavement. All the people are so busy - far too busy to notice one tourist looking at them. How different from Bali!



Shrine outside River City

And then another contrast between the dusty, workaday, noisy, bustling street and the calm and splendour of Wat Traimit, the Temple of the Golden Buddha. The Golden Buddha image is the largest such image in the world, weighing 5 tons. It is 700 years old; over a long period it was covered in plaster to conceal its value from the invading enemies, and it was only in 1955 that the plaster was accidently broken and it was realised that the statue was solid gold!

Smaller Buddhas are scattered around the temple area and the devout take little notice of the tourists and their cameras.



at Wat Traimit

From Wat Traimit by a different route back to River City, passing two more of the many Bangkok temples, and getting more glimpses of the people of Bangkok going about their business.

Then back to the hotel on the boat, for lunch and a relaxed afternoon.



The Golden Buddha

11th March

Our last day before flying home - and it was going to be a long and full one. We had booked a tour to Ayuthaya, the ancient capital of Thailand. This meant taking the 7 a.m. hotel boat to River City to join the 'River Sun' tour coach there. Driving north, the coach gave us a good view of the sprawling city; the suburbs stretch a long way, extending far past the airport. Beyond the city were fields where rice is grown - but this was the season between crops, and the fields were bare.

The first stop at Ayuthaya was at the Wat Mahathat, plundered by the Burmese in the 18th century, and now a huge area of ruins - mutilated Buddhas, collapsing towers, in various architectural styles - Thai, Khmer, Ceylon.



Wat Mahathat

From here we went to a second temple, Wat na Phra Meru, this one not destroyed by the Burmese. This was more akin to the many temples of Bangkok, and contained a large Buddha. There was time to spare here to browse around the market before leaving Ayuthaya city to drive to the Royal Summer Palace - Bang Pa In. This is said to be the 'Versailles' of Thailand!

Bang Pa In is a strange place, somewhat out of context with the rice fields of Thailand. Its architecture is borrowed from other nations; much of it is European in style (hence less interesting to us), but one of the most extravagant buildings is the Chinese pavilion. An amusing feature of the gardens was the herd of topiary elephants!



Part of the herd!



Chinese Pavilion

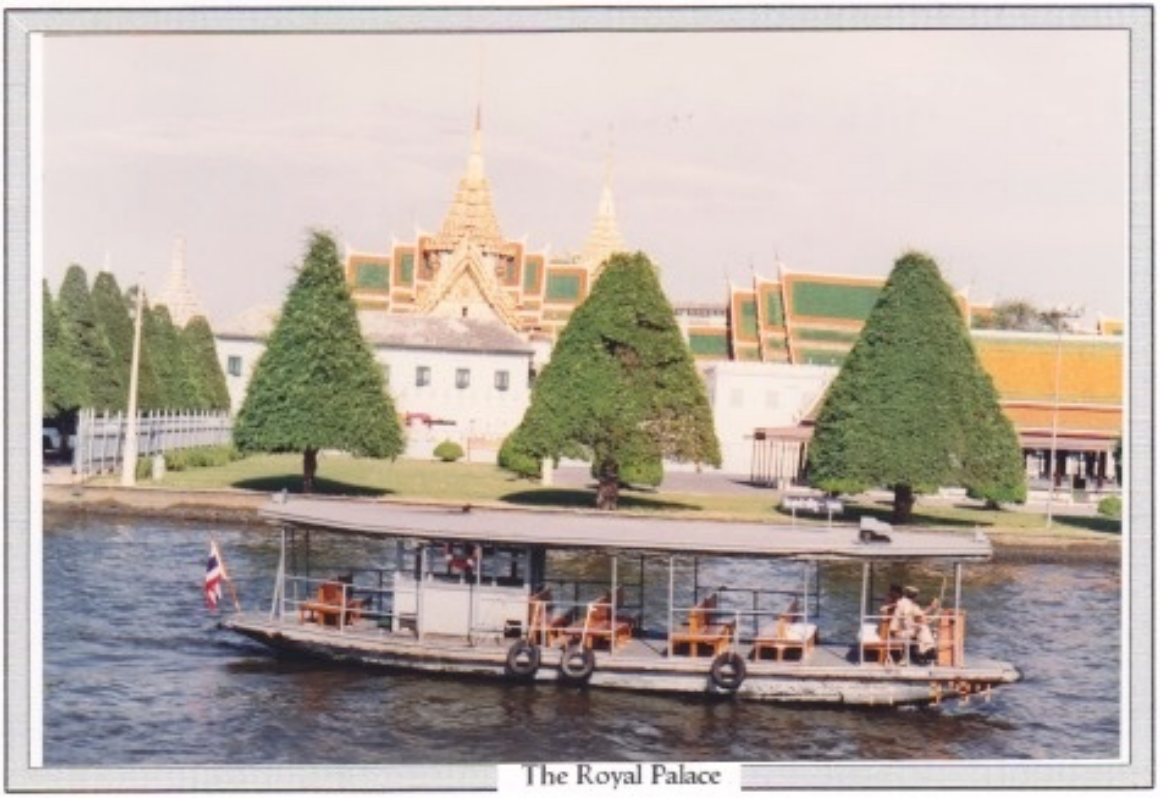
11th March continued

The coach now took us to join the boat which would take us down the river for our return to Bangkok. We had a good buffet lunch and then watched the countryside pass by - the riverside homes; the temples at frequent intervals; the river boats of all kinds. Homes were of all sorts; some were poor shacks, others up-market - second-homes perhaps for the wealthy of Bangkok. Many houses are on stilts over the river - for coolness no doubt.

This river trip was really the highlight of the day!



The last section of the journey took us past some of the sights of Bangkok itself: the Royal Barge-house; the Royal Palace itself; and the towers of Wat Arun (see next page).



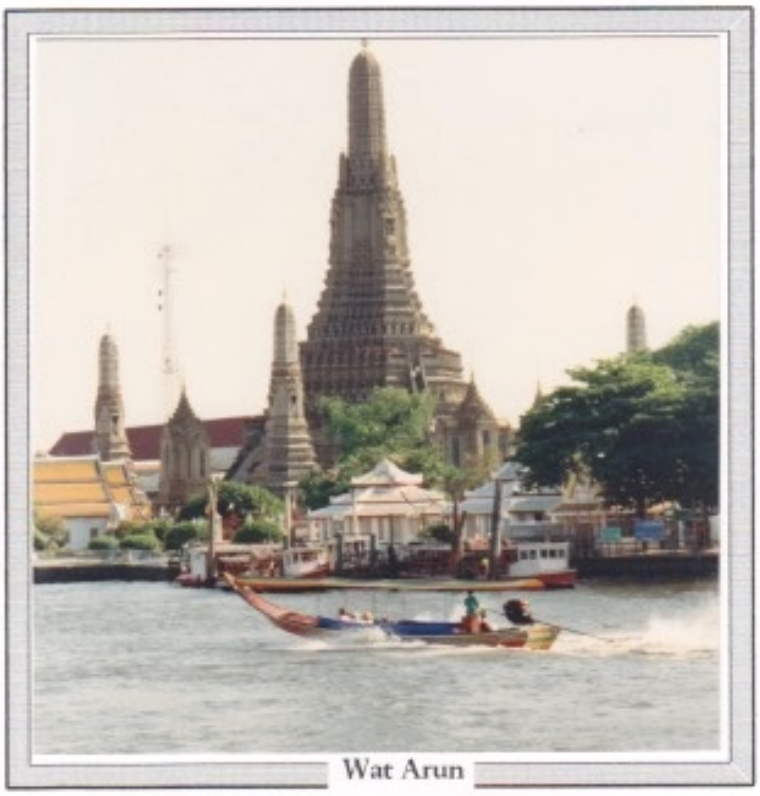
The Royal Palace

11th March continued

The boat reached River City at about 4.30 p.m. We had the entire evening ahead of us, and we were still fascinated by the sights of life in Bangkok. We walked from River City through the market areas and other local streets - all buzzing with activity.

It was eventually time to take the boat back to the Royal Garden Riverside. We no longer had our room, but we used the other hotel facilities. We had a light meal, and then took a final swim in the lovely pool - time then to get our luggage from the store-room, get ready for the long journey home - making sure that our warm things were available!

We left the hotel at 8.30 p.m.; the flight left Bangkok a little late, just after midnight. A stop at Delhi - but we had to remain aboard - and then on to Heathrow. Altogether 15 hours on the plane, and almost 24 hours from leaving the hotel to arriving home in Cheltenham.



Wat Arun

In the last 45 days we had had many highlights - commencing with the Blue Lagoon cruise. Bangkok had provided a fitting finale! A city of real character and interest. The traffic may be frightful, the city may be noisy, the river may be a little dirty and smelly, but none of these things worried us. (Though it was hot!). Of course one does need the haven of a nice hotel, on the river; and perhaps a few days is enough at one time. But we would return to Bangkok very willingly - just to see sights such as people disappearing into the little crowded alleyways, attending to their business -

