

A collection of extracts from 'My Asian Summer'



This tale documents their action-packed and adventurous journey with every: sleeper train, bamboo raft, Tuk-tuk, bus and boat ride it took for them to venture across: Hong Kong, Thailand, Cambodia and Vietnam.



I clutched the arm rest so tightly you could see the veins popping from my skin

“The engines roar broke my thoughts completely in half, forcing me to look out of the tiny window with unmistakable delight. Within seconds, the aircraft’s wings had grown, along with a whirling sound that resonated through the cabin.

Taking a generous glug from my bottle of Iced Tea, I peered at the raindrops on the cold, plastic window.

As the aircraft continued to soar through the evening sky, the howling wind desperately tried to burst through my dollhouse-sized window, causing the plastic to rattle a fierce melody. The thunderstorm’s voice seemed to echo around us every few seconds. I watched on helplessly as the dark-blue sky flashed a vibrant

Noticing a flickering of light in the distance of the ancient ruins, it was like a magical explosion of ‘Disney’

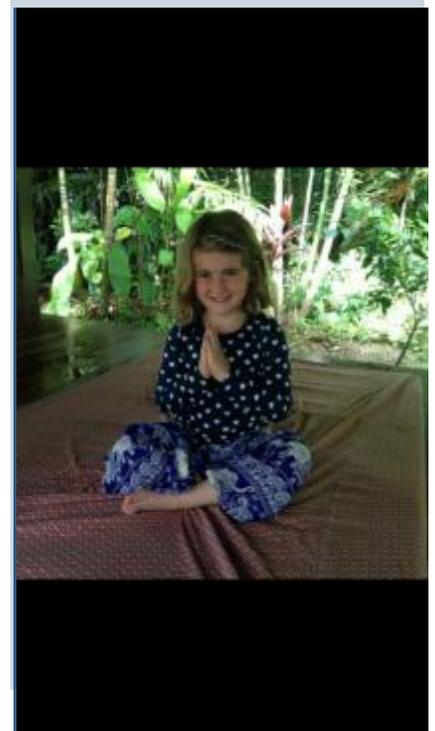
“Entering the dark gloomy cavern, I watched my shadow dissolve into the surrounding darkness and paid close attention to the quiet sound of distant, dripping water. Continuing through in silence, I looked on at our ancient surroundings and admired the jagged and uneven stone walls as they smoothly curved to the floor. It was like nothing I’d ever seen before. Innocently following the path, I noted a flickering of light in the distance. It was lighting up the tunnel and bathing the cavern into a flickering orange glow. Taking a few steps forward, I looked on and to my utter disbelief an elderly cross-legged monk dressed in a distinctive orange robe, rested on a stone pillar surrounded by candles in

shade of silver with every bolt of lightning that greeted us with its intimidating presence. I clung to Summer as we jolted up and down brusquely and the cabin lights continually flashed on and off, every so often forcing the cabin back into complete darkness. Sitting paused in thought, I fixed my eyeline on Summer’s drawing of the plane... suddenly, an almighty thud echoed through the essentially tin-can, triggering a sea of “oohhs,” and an onslaught of confused chatter among the passengers. Turning towards Carl, I watched as his leg bobbed up-and-down so quickly he resembled a nodding dog on the parcel-shelf of a fast-moving car.

Glancing to my right, I swallowed as if my life depended on it as I watched two strangers hold hands tentatively. I knew they didn’t know each other, as they hadn’t muttered a single word to each other throughout the entire flight. Their surprising closeness made me feel instantly apprehensive.”

the far corner. My eyes scanned his body as I paused for action. The monk wore no shoes and had both hands resting on his crossed knees with his palms facing towards the ceiling of the cave. His eyes remained firmly closed. Tip-toeing past ever-so slowly, the monk sluggishly opened his eyes, lifted his left four fingers up and beacons for us to approach. *Oh-my-god!* We looked at each other in total surprise. Standing in front of the monk, I watched with surprise as he touched Summer’s hand and pulled it towards his knee...”

“I prayed memories such as meeting the bear and hearing his story, stayed within Summer’s ever-developing mind and didn’t vanish as quick as the trip seemed to be closing in on us.”





Reaching the light at the end of the tunnel...

"My knees throbbed and my back pounded. Despite the obvious pain my body was experiencing, my mind was focused on maintaining a credible distance from the old man in front's bum. Inches away from the depths of his backside, it wasn't a comfortable experience that's for sure! Desperately crawling on all fours, sweat-drenched, I came to an abrupt halt. The man in front was completely stationary. Stifled by the intense humidity in the claustrophobic tunnel, I felt the urge to hunch my shoulders to the right to see what was going on. We were in the midst of a full-on human traffic jam, 15 foot underground and crawling through the remainder of what was the Viet Cong's tunnels in the Cu Chi district, 40 miles northwest of Ho Chi Minh City."



Crushing away freedom

"When you think about Thailand, the vision of chaotic Bangkok or the turquoise waters of Ko Samui may spring to mind. This diary entry will open your eyes to another rather 'hidden' side to Thailand that was both mesmerising and extremely sad for all of us. The official symbol of Thailand is the Asian elephant. Sadly, that doesn't seem to stop this incredible creature from being gravely mistreated by copious amounts of people in the very country that celebrates its existence.

When researching activities, I stumbled across the Elephant Nature Park in Chiang Mai where we could be elephant keepers. Pulling up at the striking green valley, we couldn't help but absorb our surroundings.

"This place is incredible!" said Carl in awe, drinking-in the never-ending row of magnificent mountains that were offset by a calm and tranquil river.

"Views such as this are what backpacking is all about!" I confidently spouted as I pulled my backpack from the back of the van and contemplated how undeniably beautiful the view was. "Many of our elephants have been hunted, chained, made to perform and beg for money on the streets of Bangkok... some are even sold to circuses in China." Bee, our tour guide, explained. Perhaps most shocking of all, we learnt that Thailand is home to fewer than 5,000 elephants. This figure would have been an impressive 100,000 elephants a hundred years ago. Visualising this mass decline, I couldn't believe how unbelievable and depressing the statistic actually was. We were told to head to the cinema room to watch a documentary about the park. The film certainly opened our eyes to the grief-stricken lives of the elephants. Describing how horrific the programme was would be an almost impossible task. All I can say to you is that many people were forced to leave the room. I was keen for Summer to watch at least some of the film so she would be able to acknowledge why it was so important for the elephants to reside at the park; and ultimately why we were there to help care for them."





Laura simply trusted her wit and impeccable sense of humour to safely carry her around Asia. Just think: if Laura can do it with a small child in tow, anybody can. Including you...



When sadness engulfs your heart, leaving a bitter taste in your mouth

Before leaving the UK, Summer and I fundraised for stationery and toys for a few schools and orphanages that I had planned to visit during the trip. Ban Ma Maeh School in the jungle of Chiang Mai educates and provides a home for orphaned and underprivileged children. In 2002 there was a government crackdown on drugs. Parents that were found to be guilty by the courts were sent to jail and some were even killed. This led to many children becoming orphans. The controversial 'war on drugs' campaign was said to have left more than 2,200 people across the country dead in a three-month period. The school is remote and inaccessible by road and cellular telephone signals (hence us trekking through the jungle to reach it) and under the Government's Basic Education Commission, it runs on an allowance of just 30 cents per student - which clearly isn't enough to feed the students three-times a day. There are not enough beds for all the students, leaving some having to sleep on the cold floor which sometimes causes flu and other diseases. The school is too far from the nearest hospital so it is hard for sick students to then seek medical treatment. Furthermore, there are 118 students to only seven teachers. A cemented square playground that had one extremely worn basketball hoop for entertainment glazed my vision as we crossed the bridge towards the school. I looked on as 50 or more children played what looked to be a game of tag. Tables were pushed together on the playground with the two boxes that Transglobal Express had generously posted for us a few months previous. The boxes hadn't been opened and it was nice to see them again. "Look Mummy - there's our boxes!" Summer shouted in excitement, sprinting towards them as though they were long-lost friends. I began to absorb the sight of the 50 or so children that stood before us. For obvious reasons, complete sadness engulfed my heart. I couldn't believe that every child before me was an orphan. It was one thing reading about them on the school's website, but quite another seeing just how many there were. *What would they have done if the school didn't exist?* I shuddered.

Laura's encapsulating and often heart-warming style of writing will take you on a whirlwind but remarkable tour of Asia from the comfort of your own home, making you feel as though you're alongside her throughout her journey.

