

Merry Christmas Peace Corps Memories

by

Thaine H. Allison, Jr.

North Borneo/Sarawak | 1962-64

Recently a friend asked in an email if I had ever seen one of her favorite movies "Dean Spanley" from 2008. It starred Peter O'Toole and was one his last films. I had to respond that as far as I can remember I did not see that film but I may have. I was kind of a fan of Peter O'Toole based on a close encounter a long time ago in a far, far away place.

Christmas of 1963 my, then, wife and I took our three week vacation from our Peace Corps assignment in North Borneo where we had served for about 18 months. Peace Corps in it's wisdom offered a round trip ticket to volunteers to Hong Kong or Singapore to give us a little "island relief." We decided to get one round trip ticket to Hong Kong and one round trip ticket to Singapore. We proceeded to convince the local travel agent to give us two one way tickets to Hong Kong and two one way tickets from Singapore back to Borneo.

The travel agent then arranged for us a freighter steam ship ticket from Hong Kong to Bangkok along with a stop in Saigon. We were supposed to pick up the ticket in their Hong Kong office and pay for the ticket there. Or so we were led to believe. When we got to Hong Kong, with a two day stop in Manila to visit the Rice Research project in Los Banos, we located the Hong Kong office. They had no record of such a reservation or arrangement from the North Borneo office. After a few anxious minutes the clerk was able to find a ship departing in a couple of days with a stop in Saigon, just as planned.

While it wasn't Queen Elizabeth level of travel it was quite pleasant to have dinner with the captain each of the three nights we were on the ship. We had been living a pretty sparse life in our little village, Bandau. On the morning after the second night we were scheduled to land in Saigon, spend the day, then continue the the next night to Bangkok where we would arrive mid-day the next day.

The night we were supposed to land in Saigon there was unrest following a November coup and No Diem Diem was deposed and there was chaos in the streets. The Captain announced that we would skip the Saigon stop and proceed to Bangkok. (Side note it took me 49 years to get to Saigon, but that's another story). When we got to Bangkok we connected up with other local Peace Corps Volunteers and soon learned that we should take the bus to Aranyabertete, cross into Cambodia and go through Siam Reap to Angkor Watt. We followed suit and found a cheap hotel, \$1.00 per day with French pastries and breakfast. We toured half the ruins with Mr No, the preferred guide by

Peace Corps Volunteers that proceeded us.

There was a large French Hotel with Lights and a Christmas tree. Christmas Eve the cast and crew of a film production "Lord Jim" were spending Christmas in Cambodia trying to finish the latter film. We decided to splurge and venture over in our finest, not much, and joined the very limited festivities. Christmas in a heavily Buddhist country makes you realize you are a long way away from home and a bit lonely. The Anglo French crew were not hostile but less than welcoming of a couple of crazy Americans. Peter O'Toole was amongst the guests. We shook hands and toasted to a Merry Christmas. Sang a couple of Christmas carols and ate an expensive but less than satisfying French dinner.

We said our good byes headed back to our little hotel and found a place to eat as we were quite hungry. It was all quite an adventure. After Angkor Watt we returned to Bangkok, by bus, toured the sites and took a train to southern Thailand and met up with a Peace Corps friend from college. Originally my wife and I had been assigned to Thailand but the administration decided not to send women to serve there in the first group and first years of Peace Corps. We continued our train ride to Malaya. We spent time in Malacca and Kuala Lumpur and eventually to Singapore.

We had a couple of days in Singapore and we had a chance to Whom The only have tea at the legendary Raffles Hotel. We caught our flight back to Jesselton, complication was that I had taken pity on a young boy at Angkor Watt and purchased a 6' cross bow, I still have it, and that complicated the boarding the plane. Try and do that today! Well, that was a long answer to her question.