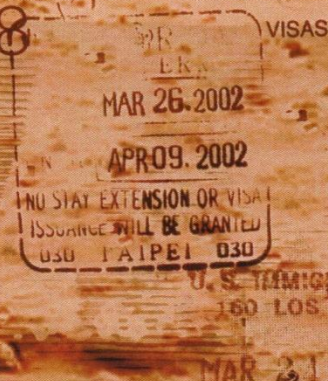


Misadventures in Far Away Places



by FRANK THOMAE

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HONG KONG

I'm running down a Hong Kong alley with three hooligans chasing me, yelling for help but nobody understands a word I'm saying. I open a door in the alley and find myself in the kitchen of a restaurant, the cooks and dishwashers with their mouths open, one cook uttering something I can't comprehend. Then suddenly the guys chasing me burst in – I scramble through the restaurant; glass, soup bowls, and cockroaches flying, people screaming things out in Chinese... That's when I wake from my dream; legs kicking around, my pillows on the floor.

I've travelled to many places in my 35 years, but have never been to Asia. In actual fact I had never had any interest – I had always pictured the continent as overpopulated, its cities huge and dirty, its peoples industrious but kind of boring – too polite and always bowing, even if secretly conniving to kill you. I know this from having watched a lot of Jackie Chan movies. Everything seems so foreign to a westerner – just reading the names of places on an Asian map makes my tongue cramp up; Xinzuoatang (China), Mahasarakham and Chauyaphum (Thailand), Kuala Kubu Baharu (Malaysia). The map of Hong Kong alone actually sounds like somebody swearing; Pok Fu Lam, Wong Chuk Hang, Chek Lap Kok (“You like I Chek Kok on Lap?”) Just the language factor seemed to make Asia an impossible destination. Then there's Asian history, culture, philosophy and etiquette – all so foreign. No, I would never have gone to Asia if it weren't for the air points given to me by my mother. “Asia,” she said, “You've never been anywhere if you haven't been to Asia.” Actually, I think my mom hoped that I would somehow get enlightened and come back a more spiritual person. Richard Gere had done it, she said, he had become a Buddhist. “Jeez Mom, Richard Gere? Is that the best you can come up with? The guy sleeps with whores. Didn't you see Pretty Woman?”

My first stop would be Hong Kong. That alone was intimidating. Over 7 million Chinese people live in Hong Kong – it has one of the highest population densities on earth with 6,700 people per square kilometre. It is known as a busy, economically thriving city. It was a British colony for 156 years. I also noted in my readings that it is famous for its cockroaches, big cockroaches, some of which fly (only the biggest ones though, if that's any consolation). I actually heard that it was trendy for kids to keep cockroaches as pets in Hong Kong – I somehow imagined children getting dragged down the street by huge, drooling cockroaches on leashes. I started to wonder if Hong Kong was my kind of place at all. People and cockroaches aside, there is nothing romantic or legendary about it. Hong Kong was a barren island when the British forcefully negotiated it from the Chinese in 1840 – it would still be a barren backwater had its history not been altered by outside factors; 1) the 1937 invasion of China by Japan and 2) the 1949 Communist revolution in China. The population was only 600,000 in 1945, it has only really exploded into what it is in the last 58 years. So there's not much in the way of history. There's not much in the way of culture either – many complain that old Chinese traditions have been lost, that materialism is the only culture alive in the ex-British colony. So what would I get out of Hong Kong? Maybe not much. But how can one go to Asia and not stop off there? I'd seen pictures of the skyscrapers from the peak, the Chinese junks in the harbour, the seemingly billions of signs lighting up busy intersections. It is a famous city, the “Pearl of the Orient” (I later found out that most Asian cities claim to be “The pearl of the Orient). I had to see it. But I honestly didn't expect much. I was quite sure I wouldn't like Hong Kong.

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I bought a nice backpack and sewed on a Canadian Flag (like every good Canadian), watched Jackie Chan movies to get an idea of what Hong Kong would look like, and read Lonely Planet over and over again. I even learned a few words of Cantonese; “Nehih ho ma” (Hi, how are you) and “Ge ih ho” (I’m fine). I got a kick out of the LP Hong Kong Guide: “Important phrases” you should know: “Ngoh to ngoh” (“I have diarrhoea”), “Ngoh yiu wan yat waih nuhih yi sang” (“I’d like to see a female doctor”), also “Haih bin doh a...?” (“Where is the...?”) but there’s no list of words anywhere to finish the sentence. I started to worry when I couldn’t find the translation to ‘toilet’ – some people make it a point to learn ‘Hello’ in the local language, I make it a point to learn ‘toilet’. Which honestly comes out to about the same thing because it’s usually the first word I say when arriving somewhere (“Toilet. Where is toilet? No, the only thing I have to declare is a 5-pound load of airplane food lodged in my lower intestine ...”)

The days counted down and I was increasingly agitated and excited. I kept having those foreboding dreams of Hong Kong alleys though – people and cockroaches chasing me, running as fast as I can with a load on my mind and no toilet in sight...

Arriving in Hong Kong – neons, highrises, & the YMCA

There was an orange/pink glow in the sky when I had my first glimpse of Asia. More than 20 hours after leaving Montreal, the sun was finally getting lower in the sky, the colours a postcard against the blues of water and sky. Suddenly, below the right wing, was a huge barren peak, a bald, grey piece of rock jutting out of the South China Sea. The glow of the setting sun reflected upon it, the soft hues of the sky making the orange/pink precipice seem both beautiful and magical. The plane descended, more peaks on the right hand side, boats suddenly appearing below the wing. The flaps of the huge 747 flipped up and we dropped further still, large high-rises appearing to our right and the boats below (some of them those famous Chinese junks) seemingly close enough to touch. We appeared to be still above water when the wheels touched down, the thrusts reversed, and we thundered down a runway to a gradual stop. The runway ran alongside the harbour at water’s edge, large ships out in the bay with the sun setting in a cloudless dark-blue sky. It was beautiful.

I had somehow pictured arriving in a crowded airport lobby full of babbling, shabbily-dressed Chinese people wearing large straw hats, all pulling at my sleeve and wanting to take me to some back alley with promises of Dim Sum and Lucy Liu. It wasn’t anything like that – Chep Lap Kok Airport is huge and incredibly modern. There’s a subway within the complex which brings you from the arrival gate to immigration. Planes take off above your head, you can see their underbellies through gigantic glass panes. The airport is cavernous, dome-like and airy. I suddenly felt like a poor country hick with my backpack and t-shirt. And the Canadian flag sewn to the bag – it suddenly reeked of insecurity (“Please leave me alone, I’m not American. We Canadians invented insulin, basketball, the green garbage bag and the zipper. We even invented the game of Yachtzee which you oriental people like so much...”)

Within 10 minutes drive of Chep Lap Kok you see the first HUGE high-rises that seem to define Hong-Kong’s skyline. I stretched my neck to see out of the bus window and just marvelled that people could live that high up. The views must be great, but I would have perpetual fears of fires

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and earthquakes. I would get constant nosebleeds, headaches and would probably never get over those dizzy spells I get when I'm too high up. I don't know how people can live in such tall buildings.

We were suddenly in the city. There is none of that slow progression from rural countryside to suburbia to city center that you get in North America. We were in an urban jungle; store after store, miniature by North American standards, cubicles in an endless stretch of concrete and glass. Neon signs hung from everything, bright neon lights in a mind-boggling assortment of colours and forms. Just looking at them was suddenly exciting. Childhood memories came to mind; those pleasant summer nights waiting for my father outside the strip joint while he finished his beer, the dancing neon outlines of naked nymphs illuminating the parking lot in a plethora of colours... Anyway, it took half an hour to make our way down the avenue, stopping at the millions of red lights, thousands of people crossing this way and that. This part of Hong Kong (we were on Nathan Road in Kowloon) brings to mind visions from science fiction films; huge, brightly-lit buildings, a giant, tightly-packed megalopolis ablaze, ant-like multitudes jamming the streets in orderly disarray. The only things missing are flying cars and buses. Sitting on the left side of the top floor of the double-decker bus (driving is on the left), I got a great view of all the action, the lights, stores and people going past; the neon at this level so close I involuntarily ducked a few times. It was incredible, my perceptions were stunned by all the activity, it was like a movie that I once saw where a crazy doctor stuck probes on a guy's temples and zapped thousands of images a second through his brain (okay, I admit it was a dirty movie.) Seeing this part of Hong Kong was like that.

Nathan Road was more built up and glitzy as we continued on, finally culminating at the very tip of the Kowloon Peninsula, an area called Tsim Sha Tsui. There I debarked and found the hotel that I had booked online (I won't mention the name but the chain is made famous by a Village People song that goes something like "It's fun to stay at the YMCA". Ok, maybe I just gave it away). "Oh no," said the hotel clerk, "no have levesacion fo Flank" He showed me the reservation list which looked something like this;

吓得说不出话来了

夸夸其谈的人

白痴,极蠢之人

Language in Hong Kong was a constant issue. You would have thought, for instance, that telling a taxi driver "YMCA" would assure you of being taken to the right place. The sign is about 3 stories high and in what has to be the most touristy part of town. They probably drive by it 100 times a day. But no, "YMCA" to a Chinese is the equivalent of "白痴,极蠢之人" to me. I quickly realized that I had to bring my hotel key with me everywhere, only by showing them the name of the hotel in Chinese characters would I get back to my room.

Back to my situation – luckily for me the "Y" had some vacancies. I went up to the room, dumped my bag, then walked back out for some sight seeing.

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Tsim Sha Tsui Promenade

I have never seen a view as overwhelming as the view from the Tsim Sha Tsui Promenade. It is one of those few things that actually managed to totally transfix me on the spot and leave me with my mouth hanging – few things do that to me anymore. The walkway looks out over Victoria Harbour and the skyline of Central (as the business center of Hong Kong is referred to). I've seen countless pictures of this scene. None of them prepared me for what I was seeing. I could never imagine that the skyscrapers were that huge. Imagine, the World Trade Center towers in New York were 417 meters tall – Hong Kong has 4 buildings approaching the size of the twin towers; The Two International Finance Centre at 415 meters, the Central Plaza at 374 meters, the Bank of China Tower at 369 meters, and Central Station at 346 meters. The MTR Tower, which will be completed in 2007, will rise to 474 meters and will be the 3rd highest building in the world upon completion. The relatively small area of Central Hong Kong holds 5 of the 20 highest buildings in the world, no other city compares to that statistic.

It is hard to take your eyes off the buildings and their gigantic signs, they literally light up the whole city with their multicoloured lights. The next thing that hits you is the harbour in front of you. The activity is non-stop – ferries go back and forth, cargo ships, trawlers, small motor boats. And the noises; the chug-chug of engines, the occasional blast of a horn. There is so much life. The last thing you notice is Victoria Peak in the background. Even at night, the mountain dominates the skyline of Hong Kong island, its dark silhouette rising behind the skyscrapers in Central. I stood there, hearing the toot-toot of the boats, the splashing of the water, and the talking and laughing of a multitude of nationalities around me. It's one of those things that you will remember the rest of your life. It took my breath away.

The first few hours in Hong Kong are a shock to the senses; so many lights, so much movement. And the sea – the humidity, sounds, and smells of salt water made the setting that much more exotic. I went back to the hotel, filled up on proteins (i.e. had a few beers) and fell asleep. I had thought that reading Lonely Planet and watching Jackie Chan movies would have prepared me – on the contrary, my first impressions of Hong Kong were unlike anything that I had ever imagined.

The Star Ferry and the Chinese penchant for spitting

The Star Ferry Terminal looks like an old wooden barn from the outside. Even at 7 am the terminal was bustling, men carrying stacks of newspapers or boxes of supplies, others in the process of opening up the newspaper/magazine stands that line the entrance to the terminal. It was a beautiful March morning with temperatures already in the high teens, the sky a clear blue. I paid at a ticket window, went through a turnstile and into the wooden building, the floorboards creaking under my footsteps. The floor descends down a series of levels to a gangplank that leads onto the ferry. The Star Ferry HAS to be experienced when in Hong Kong – the ferries themselves are painted green and are quite old and rustic, the passenger deck open (on a windy day you'll get splashed if you sit on the sides) with rows of wooden benches. In the modernity of Hong Kong there is something old world about taking the ferry, the salty breeze in your face, the water so close you feel like sticking your arm down like a child and running your hand through the surf. The ferry took about 7 minutes to cross the harbour, the early morning sun glittering off the waves, the ship's horn occasionally blaring at the large barges or small fishing boats that venture too close to it's path. The views are fantastic, the peak and the colossal buildings of Central looming as we approached the island.

My readings had warned me of pick-pockets on the ferry, what Lonely Planet doesn't cover is the Chinese penchant for spitting. To say it nicely, Chinese etiquette is quite tolerant in it's expressiveness of bodily functions. The most noticeable bodily function is the propensity to hork phlegm. Even women do it. I've seen it before – just walking through Chinatown in Montreal you see women spitting on the sidewalk. And I don't mean shy, feminine spitting, I mean deep throaty horks with nasal juice thrown in. I once read an article about the Chinese and their glorious history of phlegm spitting – it is universally regarded as an essential way to clean the system of the “mouth devils” caused by pollution and bad food. In fact, Deng Xiaoping was famed for his frequent and accurate spitting. Mao was a good spitter too. Anyway, there are signs on the Star Ferry forbidding spitting; “No spitting allowed”. There's a nice little breeze crossing the harbour – I can somehow just picture a couple of hundred Chinese horking away, the phlegm flying back and smacking fellow passengers in the face. I can imagine spitting fights breaking out, people emerging from the ferry with phlegm stains on their shirts, phlegm dripping down the sides of their faces...It didn't happen on this trip across, but it would have been kind of neat if it had.

Hong Kong Island and it's downtown parks

Victoria Peak is the best and the worst of Hong Kong. I took the tram up the mountain, a spectacular 10 minute ride with incredible vistas of the city, the high-rises, and the harbour below. We passed apartment buildings close enough to wave at people changing in their bedrooms, then further up, going through almost-tropical trees and shrubs before arriving at the Peak Tower. The views up there are phenomenal. The 7-story complex however, is a Disney World-ish erection of stores, restaurants, and entertainment centers including “Ripley's Believe it or Not!”, Madame Tussaud's wax museum, and the “Peak Explorer Motion Simulator” (just

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seeing the words “motion” and “simulator” together spontaneously makes me dry heave like a regurgitating bird) The Peak Tower is actually the tackiest thing in Hong Kong – it is Celine Dion tacky. It is Niagara Falls and the House of Anne of Green Gables rolled in one with Ben Mulroney as the doorman..

Fortunately the Peak consists of much more than just the tower. There are many trails around the peak with great views of Central and Kowloon as well as vistas across the southern part of Hong Kong island – I saw Aberdeen on the south coast, and Lamma Island a little further out. It was like being on a perch at the top of the world – the views were gorgeous and it was very quiet and peaceful. I met a few people walking their dogs, everyone saying “Hi” or “Good morning” (I responded with my usual “Screw you” or “What’s so good about it ?” – no, not really). With a good map, you can actually hike the whole of Hong Kong island. I had that in mind but got lost, going through a forest of trees before turning a corner to see the monstrous Peak Tower looming over me. I decided to have breakfast. A tip for anyone ordering “eggs and pork” from the menu at the Peak Tower café – it’s not “bacon and eggs”, it’s actually a noodle soup with a pork chop and egg floating on the surface. Actually, it was very good, the only problem was when the pork chop slipped out of my chopsticks and fell back into the bowl, splashing soup all over my T-shirt. I spent the rest of the day being the dumb white guy with soup stains on his shirt.

It was about 11 by the time I finished my soup and realized that the Peak Tower was full of tourists; loud, fat tourists with loud clothing and fat, loud kids all begging to puke on the motion simulator or have their picture taken with a wax replica of Prince Charles. I decided to take the tram back down, the city now bustling with the clang-clang-clang of construction somewhere in Central, the beep-beep of traffic, and in the background the always present hoot-hoot of boats in the harbour. Coming down the mountain the temperature seems to rise about 10 degrees.

Next to the Peak Tram Terminus is Hong Kong Park. It is a beautiful park, a horticulturalist’s wet dream with its vast gardens of colourful flowers. It also has a great viewing tower affording fantastic views of Hong Kong’s tallest high-rises – I love places with viewpoints, I’m the guy you usually see sprinting up the steps of the highest building or climbing up the nearest tree. The park also has a great bird aviary – there are parakeets, flamingos, all kinds of beautiful, exotic birds with weird and wonderful calls. I had a huge pelican stand a few feet from me; he had a big beak and didn’t seem at all scared of me – I kept my distance. My boss Tony always talks about pelicans, saying I need a pelican in my life, that a pelican could “Chew me up and spit me out”. Oops, actually he was talking about older women. Anyway, the bird aviary is a huge open area with a large net-like dome covering it. It’s almost like being in the rainforest, except for the panoramic view of Hong Kong high-rises through the net.

Close by are the Zoological and Botanical Gardens. The Botanical Gardens are beautiful, with a large fountain and more wonderful views. Next to it is the zoo. Again, everything here was impeccably maintained (and free) I saw many varieties of birds, monkeys, even a beautiful black panther. The orangutans are the highlight however – they are so humanlike; the babies with small innocent baby faces, the adolescent orangutans swinging off tires, hiding in paper boxes (their favourite playthings), and rolling around play fighting. There was one fat old male, looking like Jabba the Hutt, barely moving except to occasionally stick a finger up its nose. It was actually very touching seeing the interrelationship in the orangutan family, they were amazingly gentle with each other. Orangutans are quite intelligent; they can be taught to communicate with

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humans and can even solve puzzles – in fact, recent studies have shown that orangutans surpass the intelligence level of the average Republican president upon reaching puberty. They also have a much nicer personality. There were a lot of children visiting the zoo and almost all were at the large orangutan cage, the kids smiling and laughing at the orange apes and the white guy with the soup stains.

I had never thought that Hong Kong would be so modern and clean, or that it would have so many fabulous green spaces right in the heart of the city. The guidebooks don't prepare you for that. But you can walk around all day doing nothing but admiring beautiful scenery, greenery, and exotic animals. You can even sprawl out on a park bench and take a nap (as I did in the Botanical gardens). Hong Kong also has amazingly clean public bathrooms in its parks. My theory is that a city's public bathrooms say a lot about the state of the city itself. If you see unflushed faeces or, worse, faeces wiped against latrine walls, then it's a pretty good assumption that the city doesn't have the time or money to clean the streets of dog shit, litter, or even dead animals. I've been places where I've seen the remains of dead animals decorating the road like patches of cheap carpeting. Guess what? Those places had really filthy public bathrooms.

The Indian Fortune Teller

I got myself a couple of pastries and a coffee and settled myself down on a bench on the Tsim Sha Tsui Promenade, the views of the Hong Kong Island and the harbour magnificent in the early morning sun. My peace lasted at most 5 minutes. I saw an Indian with a huge turban on his head and I knew I was in his sights (I always attract panhandlers, old women, and cats – panhandlers for money, old women to fall asleep on my shoulders in buses/planes/trains, cats I'm allergic to so they stick to me like shit on toilet paper.) Once this man started talking I couldn't get a word in;

“Hello! My name is Jaswinder Pal Singh, I am renowned fortune-teller – I use tarot card and also read your hand. What is Your Name?”

“Frank,” I replied.

“Frank, my friend, you come from far away, that I can tell you. Give me your hand...I think you are lonely person. You are looking for love, that I can tell you too. You are successful, you have good employment. You have friends. I want to give you your fortune, tell you about yourself and the future”.

“No thank you, I'm not interested, I don't really believe in fortune telling” I replied.

“Why you not believe? I am very renowned fortune-teller in Hong Kong. Look at my card. You think I am not authentic? I want to tell you your future!”.

I was starting to get upset “No, no thank you. I don't want my fortune read”.

The man started to see that he wasn't getting anywhere “I gave you information, would like you to pay me.”

I was starting to burn, but took out my wallet, opened up the little change holder to give him coins...

“Sir, I am not BEGGAR, I am FORTUNETELLER!!”

I'm not proud of the rest of the story – suffice to say that I turned bright red and lost my marbles. I was Eminem without the background beat.

Central & Sheung Wan

The view in Central is monopolized by huge, modern skyscrapers. It's particularly beautiful early in the morning, the rising sun reflecting off the zillions of windows. The day before I had turned left out of the Star Ferry terminal and visited the parks, this time I turned right, heading down Connaught Road. I just walked and walked, huge modern high-rises on either side blocking off the sun, buildings and cement everywhere, two-story buses and trams clank-clanking down the street. There were hoards of people, all walking fast with a purpose. What really flabbergasted me were the cell phones everywhere, everyone had a cell phone stuck to their ear. This summed up Central; tons of traffic, tons of people with cell phones rushing places, and tons of huge buildings containing offices and shopping malls. It was modern but not beautiful or otherwise noteworthy. I walked through it all and ended up in Sheung Wan, the district just west of Central. This part of Hong Kong was older, the buildings lower and comprised of grey cement and rusted steel. The well-dressed, well-groomed professionals of Central gave way to scruffier blue-collar types in jeans and sweatshirts. I did the "Sheung Wan Walking Tour" suggested by Lonely Planet. I saw tons of small wholesale stores selling herbs, seaweeds and seafood, workmen busy offloading trucks, carrying large boxes of supplies on their shoulders into the stores. In between stores and apartment buildings, I saw a few old-looking temples, the smell and smoke of incense in the air. What surprised me most, and this was true of my whole time in Hong Kong, was the Chinese reaction to me – if they ever looked at me I never noticed it. I felt as conspicuous as the sole guy in an aerobics class (done that), yet it's as if I was invisible to the Chinese eye. Hey, thinking about it, that's about the same reaction I got in the aerobics class 'Maybe if we just ignore him he'll stop staring at our asses and go away'. Hmm... Anyway, the tour was interesting but nothing earth shattering. I finished my downtown tour with a tram ride, sitting on the 2nd floor, watching the world go by and happy not to be fighting my way through the crowded streets of Central.

Lan Kwai Fong & giving birth to Indian food

I love Indian food. The stuff is addictive. The only problem is when IT hits you – a sudden burning sensation in the lower extremities. Within minutes you go from feeling perfectly normal to being a sweaty mess on a toilet bowl, your intestines backfiring like a car without a muffler, your bowels quaking with relief and shock at the seemingly living, steaming lump they are delivering. It's the closest thing to childbirth a man will ever experience.

"The Curry Club" is in the small, cool area of Lan Kwai Fong, just a little north of Central. The district is a maze of low-rise bars and restaurants, streets meandering and joining in all directions, the streets buzzing with young co-workers on their lunch breaks. I walked the area, lost even with my map, until I suddenly came upon a small, closed-off street teeming with the lunchtime crowd. There were a few Indian men standing around with menus, others serving food to the people seated under the umbrella-ed tables.

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“I’m looking for The Curry Club.”

I was overheard by a man a few feet away; “Sir, here is Curry Club, come with me”.

He took me to the entrance of an old 3 or 4 story building that looked like an apartment block. A rusty, dangerous-looking elevator opened up. I got in despite my senses shouting at me not to. 3 floors up we went, getting out of the elevator into a shoddy-looking hallway.

“Over here sir.” My Indian friend opened up an old wooden door. I had gone this far and figured there was no turning back. I went in. It was a two-room apartment that had been converted into a restaurant, well lit by a few windows that overlooked the tables in the courtyard below. It was clean and comfortable, nicely decorated with Indian paintings and decorations, half of its 10 tables occupied by young white-collar types, the same that you would see occupying terraces on Crescent Street or St. Denis in Montreal. I relaxed. I quickly learned that appearances in Hong Kong can be deceiving; what might look like a hole-in-the-wall in a shoddy apartment building to a North American may just as well be a very respectable (if unpretentious) restaurant in Hong Kong.

Full of chicken curry, naan bread and beer I headed back to the hotel, arriving just before IT struck. Like a proud mother – relieved, unburdened and sweaty from the effort, I fell into deep sleep.

George

I received a call later that afternoon; my buddy George had just arrived in Hong Kong! Actually, the truth is that he and his family had arrived earlier that morning from Toronto but had been stuck at immigration all day. Seems that the expiry date on his passport was less than 6 months away. You need a minimum 6 months validity on your passport to get into Hong Kong (or into any other place for that matter). The fact that he would screw up with such a detail was no surprise to me – George is a good guy, my best friend since we were teenagers. But organization and planning is not his thing. See, I read up on a destination, make a list of what I have to see, where I should stay etc, etc. Everything is planned. I have lists, which I’ve taped on the inside covers of my Lonely Planet (I swear this is true) of; 1. My plane itinerary 2. George’s plane itinerary (see, I know he had been scheduled to arrive at 6:55 am in Hong Kong), 3. Bus routes I should take (more on this later.) I even have a listing of the locations of public toilets in Central. Maybe I go overboard, but I’m organized. George isn’t.

George was born in Hong Kong but had moved to Canada when he was 10 – I met him over 20 years ago in high school in Ottawa and we have always stayed in touch despite the fact that he now lives in Toronto and I in Montreal. It just so happens that he had also planned a trip to Asia, he was going back with his parents and sister to re-visit their old neighbourhoods in Hong Kong and Macau. The plan had been to meet up with them for a few days. I would hopefully learn a lot in their company. I was also looking forward to a lot of drinking/shooting the shit with George.

I sensed a bit of tension and fatigue when I arrived at their hotel, but his family is so nice they always make light of things – his father; “George have old passport, he not plan, they not want to let him in the country, he-he, he-he. We wait all day in airport”. George’s parents are cute, in their 60’s and barely 5 feet tall if that. Cecilia, George’s sister, is quite pretty in an oriental

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Sandra Bullock-ish kind of way with long, beautiful dark hair. George had once told me that I would be a dead man if I ever looked at her the wrong way. George, at about 5'6, is the tallest member of the family, he kind of looks like Jackie Chan except without any of the good looks. Actually I'm lying, a few (white) girls I know actually find him "cute", but in a Chia pet/team mascot kind of way. Anyway, at 5'10 I feel like a tall, gangly white tourist guy when I hang around with him and his family. People look at us strange, as if I were somehow switched at birth without their knowledge, their stares full of hidden meaning and suppressed knowledge ("DON'T YOU SEE?? He's a tall white guy! He's not your son! He's a freak!!") Then again, maybe I'm just paranoid.

Chinese food part 1 – bicycle inner tubes & chicken feet

I took George and his family to the Tsim Sha Tsui promenade, then we went out for supper on Nathan road. We had a really hard time finding the Chinese restaurant that the hotel concierge had recommended to George.

"Why don't you ask someone where it is?" I asked.

"I only know the name in English" he replied.

George speaks Cantonese but can't read or write the language.

"What the hell kind of oriental are you?" I asked.

We finally found it thanks to George's father.

The Chinese have a famous saying; "Anything that walks, swims, crawls, or flies with its back to heaven is edible." Eating different foods is fun and interesting – it is even more so with Chinese food where not only can you not tell the difference between, say chicken and pork, but where you sometimes can't even differentiate between a sort of noodle or some strange algae or a bicycle inner tube. Half the time you have no idea what you are eating. Despite that I enjoyed everything the Wongs ordered that night, everything except the chicken feet. Imagine your grandmother's old, wrinkled hand; long-nails still intact – now imagine your grandmother's hand boiled up and served on a platter and Chinese people fighting over it, scraping skin (there's no meat) off the fingers and eating it like its KFC. Yeeech! Brings a new meaning to finger licking good.

Hong Kong yuppies & repressed sex

Tommy and Irene are friends of George's from university days in Toronto. We met up with Tommy at The Peninsula hotel – Tommy is an account manager for a Hong Kong bank, it was 9 Pm and he had just finished work. He looked like the typical banker; black suit, thick glasses, a fancy briefcase. A bit too serious and formal, he had the demeanour of an undertaker. We got in Tommy's car and sped off to the district of Wan Chai for drinks in a fancy hotel bar. Irene came to join us there – I liked her right away; she was a pretty, somewhat round-ish Chinese girl with a cheerful smile, the type you just feel like hugging after too many drinks.

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The next 3 hours were spent drinking and hearing about university drinking binges. Vomit was a re-occurring theme. In between all this I got glimpses into Tommy's and Irene's lives: Tommy was married (unhappily from what I gathered), Irene was getting married (she didn't seem too excited about it.) Both worked very long hours. It became obvious that this was the norm in Hong Kong. It seemed to me that there was a lot of pressure to conform, socially and professionally. On top of that, there's the cost of living – Hong Kong has astronomical real estate and rental prices (a basic one bedroom apartment anywhere central will rent anywhere from \$3,000 to \$7000 US per month). Tommy mentioned he and his wife living with his parents until they had the money to move out on their own. How depressing is that? I bet they can't even moan or move the furniture around when they have sex. No wonder he seemed so dour. Hong Kong didn't seem like the easiest place on earth to make a living. Despite a good time the evening finished on a bit of a downer.

Hong Kong Island's Southern coast – Sadam, Stanley, & nuns

I don't believe in taking tours, my philosophy is that if you do your research you can see/do the same things as a tour without paying out all that cash, being fixed to a schedule, or hanging around other goofy tourists.

I waited for the 973 bus about a block down the street from the Star Ferry terminal, the only other person waiting was a very attractive and smiley Chinese girl with a suitcase. "Where are you going?" I asked.

"I'm going to the airport, I'm taking the plane to Sydney for vacation" said she.

Oh well. "Australia, wow that's exciting" I said, of course meaning "Hey, I'm on vacation too, maybe we can neck while we wait for the bus" but she didn't pick up on that. Her bus came a few minutes later and we said our good-byes.

The 973 soon followed. The bus was nearly empty – I went to the top deck, the only other people were a white couple accompanied by a Chinese lady. Being an opportunistic mooch, I smelled a free guided tour and sat right behind them at the front of the bus. I was right, the Chinese lady was a guide for the couple and spent the 45 minute-odd trip along Hong Kong island's south coast pointing out places of interest – Aberdeen and the floating restaurants in the harbour, Repulse Bay and some of its fancy apartment buildings, the beach at Deep Water Bay. "Hey, can you speak up lady" I thought of saying, never saying it but giggling to myself at the thought which brought a few funny looks my way (her voice was too low.) The geography was amazing; ocean, beaches, and mountains lush with greenery. Busy Hong Kong seemed to have transformed itself into southern France within a few kilometres. The bus made its way up, down, and around cliffs – my gut churning at times looking down the steep precipices. Actually 45 minutes was just fine, by the time we arrived in Stanley I was just starting to feel the prior evening's chicken feet coming back to life.

Stanley is about the southernmost point on Hong Kong island – it is quiet yet touristy, with a bustling market and a nice beach. I looked for a Jackie Chan T-shirt at the market but had no luck. I found that really bizarre as he's probably the most famous Hong Kong celebrity, he's

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even used as a life-sized billboard advertisement by the Hong Kong Tourist Association – but I might as well have been asking for a Saddam Hussein T-shirt the way people looked at me. Being in Stanley was like being in a seaside resort far from the city. Actually, the truth is that it is a seaside resort. It's also the retirement home for a lot of elderly, affluent whites – the white/Asian ratio here was a lot higher than in any other Hong Kong communities. The place felt a bit like a last remaining colonial outpost in Hong Kong – the elderly gents in their knee-high socks, no doubt off for an afternoon of lawn bowling, followed by a little late-afternoon slap-and-tickle with the wife, better than a slap in the face with a wet kipper, what? You get the idea...

I strolled around Stanley, lazed at the beach, then walked up a hill to a temple which seemed to have only nuns and female worshippers. Reading up later I found out that this was the Kuan Yin temple “This temple with its complement of nuns (Who are often in prayer, so be respectful) displays a 48-armed figure of Kuan Yin (The goddess of mercy and compassion, usually worshiped by women)” explains Lonely Planet. Of course I didn't know that at the time and got some funny stares when I whipped out my penis (ok, I'm joking...). The temple had very nice views of Stanley and the harbour and I stuck around a while before making my way back down the hill.

I took the number 6 bus back to Central. Whereas the 973 had followed the coast of the island in reaching Stanley, this bus took a different course – up, up, up it went, meandering up the huge hills, through forests, then winding among the peaks, offering wonderful views of the whole southern half of the island. Then suddenly down to incredible views of Central, the late afternoon sun reflecting off the silver and glass high-rises. It had been a wonderful, beautiful day.

Chinese food part 2 – eyeballs

Another interesting supper with the Wong family. We had a huge fish – this time the fight was over the eyeballs. Eyeballs are supposedly a delicacy (and undoubtedly an aphrodisiac – being an “aphrodisiac” seems to be the most common excuse for a lot of the more unusual things the Chinese eat: “Oh yes, taste tellible. But is aphrodisiac! Many happy time”) Being a polite Chinese host Mr. Wong offered me both eyeballs. I declined. A frenzy of activity started around me, a heated exchange as to whom would get the eyeballs. Cecilia and George finally agreed to share them – but Cecilia fooled George by eating the first then flipping the fish over onto its other side while he wasn't looking. Then she ate the other. Of course when George flipped the fish over looking for the other eyeball it was already gone. George's mom and dad thought this was really funny and laughed themselves silly. They laughed so hard that their eyeballs popped out. And then Cecelia ate them (Okay, I'm joking about that last part.)

Chinese Salsa

George and I had arranged to meet Irene at a Latin dance club. I had bragged to Irene that I was a good Salsa dancer – the truth is that I know a few dance moves and can get by in a 1st or 2nd level class in Montreal. “What do Asians know about Salsa?” I snickered to myself.

Thanks to the fight over the eyeballs we arrived late. Inside the club were hundreds of people, separated into different levels. Everyone was already paired off, couples jam-packed on the dance floor, holding hands, doing turns... The teacher was blaring instructions into a microphone, his helpers spread out around the room, swiftly swooping down on any couple stupid enough to miss a move or lead with the wrong foot. I instantaneously realized that I was way out of my league – it made me remember what I had wished to forget; taking level 2 classes I had fallen behind and hired a private dance teacher to help me out at home. Johanna (she was Venezuelan) had tried, but once out of frustration had told me “You are too stiff, you dance like a soldier”. She had marched across the floor like a Nazi to demonstrate. “You also don’t know the difference between right and left estupido!” This flooded back to me as I was standing there. I wasn’t getting on that dance floor. Leave it to the Chinese to perfect the art of Salsa dance, I thought. They are so hard-working, efficient and persistent that I should have never doubted their ability to master such a mundane thing as a Latin dance

Dance classes always attract more girls than guys, more often than not there aren’t enough men to go around – they end up hanging around the dance floor chatting (or even dancing) with other girls. In this case, they were not just girls, they were beautiful, sexy, well-dressed women languidly sucking drinks through straws. ‘Holy Testicle Tuesday Batman!’ – we were the luckiest guys in the club! It didn’t take long before George started talking to a girl standing next to the bar. Her friend honed in on me – Hmm, attractive Chinese girl, quite tall, great body. Not the greatest teeth, looked like she was hooked on chewing tobacco. Bet she was a good spitter. Her English was also almost non-existent.

It was past midnight when we left, both of us high on the perfume of beautiful women. I had a telephone number in my pocket, George telling me that the girl wanted to show me around the city. I recommend going to any Salsa club in Hong Kong – just make sure you show up late.

The MTR

Lonely Planet: “ Mass Transit Railway (MTR): One of the world’s most modern subway systems, the MTR is clean, fast and safe. This subway surpasses Montreal’s, never mind Toronto or New York which it puts to shame...It honestly took me 10 minutes to get from the Tsim Sha Tsui station to the Sheung Wan station in Central where the Macau Ferry Terminal is located. I

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couldn't get over how clean and fast this thing was, my only problem was figuring out the ticketing system – LP: “The MTR uses “smart tickets”, which have a magnetic coding strip in the back... When you pass through the turnstile, the card is encoded with the station identification and time. At the other end, the exit turnstile reads where you came from, the time and how much you paid, and lets you through if all is in order. Don't worry if you underpaid by punching the wrong button on the ticket machine, you can pay the difference at the other end”. HA! I beg to differ – I got to “the other end” and the turnstile closed shut and started beeping and whistling like an El-Al security checkpoint. I had to turn back, people looking at me as if I was a moron (“Yes, hello, I'm a moron”). I went to the ticket office, shrugged, told the man that the machine ate my ticket and wouldn't let me through... he gave me a special stupid-tourist pass and the turnstile let me out.

MACAU

Don't be suckered in by the dweeb with the glasses who tells you that Macau is about Portuguese colonial architecture. It's not – the guy is either a whorer or a gambler, because these are the main attractions in Macau. We (The Tungs and I) were buying our tickets in the Macau Ferry Terminal, wholesome images of Portuguese architecture bouncing around in our heads, to come face to face with the posters – lewd posters of succulent Asian beauties in suggestive poses, all promoting different clubs and events. I almost changed my mind about going, finally deciding to let the ticket girl off with just a warning; “Ok, I'll buy the ticket – but if the women in Macau all dress as sleazily as you depict in your posters then I want my money back...” Ok, I'm lying.

Much like Goa (in India) and Malacca (in Malaysia), the Portuguese secured Macau in the 16th century to benefit from growing trade between the western world and Asia. It was the first European settlement in the Far-East and held a monopoly on trade with China for almost 300 hundred years, also dealing either directly or indirectly with flows of goods from India, Japan and the west. The end of Macau as a major trading outpost came when the British took over Hong Kong in 1840. That's when the colony reinvented itself by legalizing gambling. Gambling has been Macau's main source of revenue ever since, bringing with it the undesirables; prostitution, drugs and gangs - “triads” they are called, basically the Asian version of the mafia. Things sometimes get violent – 1997 was a particularly bad year for Macau with 29 members of various triads getting assassinated, most in spectacular fashion; in most instances in broad daylight by machine-gun wielding assassins on motorcycles. I found an interesting article in the May 14, 1997 edition of the Washington Post “...one of the victims that rain-soaked Sunday was 37-year-old Sek Weng-cheong, whom police and local intelligence officials identified as the right-hand man of Broken Tooth Koi, the suspected “dragon head,” or boss, of Macau's largest and most notorious triad, the 14K. The brazen hit on such a senior 14K figure — taking place on one of Macau's busiest commercial strips — was a direct warning to Broken Tooth, police said, that the 14K's traditional dominance was now being challenged by the smaller Soi Fong, or Water Room triad.” Wow, gang leaders with names like “Broken Tooth Koi”, triads named “14K” and “Water Room.” Macau sounded intriguing, kind of like a real-life Gotham city.

It takes about an hour on a large jet-powered ferry to get from Hong Kong to Macau. From the terminal we took the taxi to the Ritz hotel (where we had a beautiful room at a fraction of the

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price of an equivalent room in Hong Kong), dumped our stuff, then went to Centro which is the downtown area of Macau renowned for its colonial Portuguese architecture.

Macau – Centro

The colonial legacy is everywhere in Centro and I found it kind of strange walking down cobbled streets with Portuguese names. I've been to Portugal, I've walked through Lisbon, and I sure as hell never saw any oriental people. It just doesn't fit together – it would be like going somewhere where black people live in igloos. The main stretch for sightseeing in Centro is from Leal Senado to Fortaleza de Monte, which is right next to the Facade of St. Paul's Cathedral (burned down in 1835, only the beautiful front of the church remains.) Walking the approximate half-kilometre is like walking in some of the most beautiful parts of Lisbon; cobbled streets, fountains, a few magnificent old churches, beautiful colonial buildings in pastel colors: pink, yellow, orange, some in classical white – it really is like stepping back in time. The sun actually popped out for about a half-hour while we did our walking tour (never again to re-appear, it was quite a miserably cool, windy, and rainy day). We finished by climbing up the hill to Fortaleza de Monte, a fort with big cannons and colourful gardens offering views over Macau and mainland China on the other side of the harbour. Unfortunately, the resemblances to Lisbon end up here – in the street below, walking that half-kilometre, you could think yourself in the Portuguese capital – from the fort, reality asserts itself. Macau and the land on the other side of the harbour are full of ugly, 1950's Russian style apartment buildings. Everywhere I looked were dishevelled-looking factories and decrepit buildings. I was quite disappointed – I had thought Macau would be more pristine. Outside Centro, Macau just looks run down – beautiful architecture amid a lot of crap. I see things like that and it makes me upset – one of the few places I found absolutely stunning in Greece was the volcanic island of Santorini, the geographical setting was breathtaking. Yet walking on Santorini's beaches, and in its towns, was garbage – locals throwing garbage in street corners, not appreciating the beauty around them or even acknowledging how privileged they are to have one of the world's major tourist attractions at their doorstep, a huge source of revenue. Similarly, I can imagine Macau as a colonial jewel a hundred years ago. Construction must have sprouted unregulated and unchecked. It's a shame and it left me disappointed.

Macau's other islands

Having walked most of the afternoon, we took a taxi tour and saw the connecting islands of Taipa and Coloane. There was a modern international airport on Taipa which caught my eye – it surprised me to read in LP that the airport has direct flight from “A number of cities including Lisbon, Seoul, Singapore, Taipei, Bangkok, and a number of cities in China”. Apart from that there was nothing to see on Taipa. Coloane has a few resorts and some nice beaches sporting seaside cafes and restaurants and has quite a European feel to it. I could somehow visualize topless Latin women frolicking on the beach on a warm sunny day.

Nightlife in Macau – prostitutes and Filipina lesbians

Nightlife – primarily gambling – is why tourists go to Macau. Most come from Hong Kong and mainland China; of the approximately 16.6 million visitors that came to Macau in 2004, 88% came from either Hong Kong or mainland China. The average length of a tourist visit is 1.2 days – they come here on the weekend, gamble, go to seedy club, get laid and go home.

The Wongs and I had an incredible meal in a fabulous Portuguese restaurant, George's parents talking about coming here during WWII – Hong Kong had been invaded by the Japanese and the refugees poured into Macau. Although the Japanese did not technically occupy Macau (because of Portuguese neutrality in the war) they did control the flow of goods and people into the territory. Times were tough – and I don't say this lightly – it's hard for a westerner of my generation to comprehend how brutal the Japanese army was. All Chinese women in Hong Kong, for example, were declared to be prostitutes and were free to be used by Japanese soldiers. Men were executed, and soldiers – many British and Canadian – were starved or sent to Japan to work as slave labour. Like Germany in the west, many Asians will never forget or forgive what the Japanese did in most of Asia during World War II.

The rest of the Wong family took the ferry back to Hong Kong for the night, leaving George and I alone to explore the seedy side of Macau. We decided to start our evening at the Lisboa Hotel, home of Macau's famous casino. It was nothing to impress. The Casino was on 3 levels, each floor comprised of a large smoke-filled room, the games or machines the only aspect differentiating the three floors. Around the large circular gaming rooms ran a corridor where vendors would sell cigarettes and drinks and where butt ugly prostitutes would linger. Most seemed Russian. The idea of sex with these women grossed me out – slideshows of red lesions and puss filled blisters from sex-ed class popped into my mind. Fortune magazine “Don't expect to find martini-sipping gamblers in tuxedos with bejeweled female companions placing bets at Macau's Casino Lisboa. Do expect a lot of gruff, badly dressed men hunched over gaming tables drinking tea-as well as peeling paint on the ceiling, platinum blonde prostitutes in the coffee shop, and plastic flowers in the hallways.”) That basically sums up the casino.

We wanted a “happening” bar. It was a Thursday night, yet the streets of Macau were deserted and quiet, ugly concrete blocks devoid of colour or life. The taxi driver finally found a place with a bit of action – it was a nice little bar with a live band consisting of 3 beautiful Filipina girls wearing black tights. It hadn't taken me long to realize that Filipinas were the most beautiful and sexy Asian women; dark-skinned and curvaceous (the Latin mix I assumed), most are also perfectly fluent in English. George and I ordered beer after beer, ogling the girls who smiled appreciatively as we led the cheering section. It must have been about midnight when they finished their act. We went over and said hello, they were polite but cool and we knew our overtures weren't leading anywhere. George and I thought about it afterwards and figured it out. They were lesbians. Yup, what are the odds of two Canadians coming to Macau and meeting a trio of Filipina lesbians? It's a strange world.

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The next stop on our tour of Macau was “a strip joint”. The taxi driver took us to a fancy club where we each paid a \$20 US (ouch!) entrance fee to a big, nasty looking guy at the door. Inside it was beautiful, blue neon lighting showing off a lot of steel trimming and velvet upholstery – and sexy women; Russians, Chinese, Thais... gorgeous women walking around in little teddies and silk underwear, all looking at us flirtatiously – women this good-looking usually look at me like I’m a pool of vomit on the sidewalk. We sat down and ordered a round of drinks, looking at a girl dancing provocatively on stage. But that’s all she did – no stripping, no sex toys, no circus tricks, nothing... “This is kind of boring” I muttered, “Hey George, how about you asking that guy for our money back?” A woman, the madam of the house we were to find out, came to speak to George. She gave us a binder full of pictures of sexily-clad women. George explained: “We can chose any of those women and take them upstairs or to our hotel.” The cost, after asking (for research purposes) was \$200 US a girl. I looked down at the binder and contemplated bolting for the door with it under my arm.

George talked to the taxi driver in Cantonese, both chuckling in a fashion that I knew meant that the evening was not over. “The driver knows this other place,” said George, “Its a lot cooler than the last place, c’mon lets check it out.” That’s how we ended up going to a brothel. It was on another of Macau’s characterless blocks, distinguishable only by the lights emanating from behind curtained windows. We stepped through the door into a nicely decorated reception lounge, the walls brightly painted, one wall with long velvety curtains running from floor to ceiling. A well dressed and very distinguished man met us at the reception. After a few minutes of chit-chat he turned around and pulled a cord. The wall decorated with the velvety curtain sprung open – within 10 feet of us were about 20 seated girls in bikinis! The room that had opened up in front of us was all white, the lights coming down on the girls. It was like the opening act of the Miss America pageant.

“Well, gentlemen, you just have to pick the lady of your choice” said the man. We just kind of gawked like a bunch of school kids. The women sat quietly, some smiling at us. They ranged from their early-twenties to mid-thirties, some Chinese, others clearly Thai.

“Well buddy, what do you think?” asked George. We had talked of having fun, but being in a brothel and picking a girl from behind a glass partition wasn’t how I had imagined things.

“You go ahead, I’ll watch” I said. No, I didn’t actually say that, I actually said something like “I don’t want to do anything...” Okay, so I wimped out.

That was our wild night in Macau.

I didn’t think much of Macau, the only thing positives for me were 1) the food, which was fantastic everywhere we went, be it Chinese or Portuguese, and 2) the half-kilometre stretch of Portuguese architecture in Centro. I found Macau dingy – I looked forward to getting back to glitzy and glamorous Hong Kong.

Back to Hong Kong – the Prostitution Argument & other odds and ends

It was a cloudy, cool day and I woke up to an equally frosty “Good morning” from George. We took the taxi to the ferry terminal and had a fight about the previous night. What followed was our “Prostitution argument.” George couldn’t understand why I had chickened out at the brothel – George, and this might be a Chinese trait, has straightforward ideas about exchanges of services/trading of goods; whether you pay a guy to clean your shoes or a girl to sit on your face, it’s the same concept. They are in business, you pay, you get the goods. I have ‘White Man’s Guilt’ – ‘Thou shalt not take advantage of the unfortunate for thou foulest desires’ (I made that up, but you get the idea.) The “choosing a chick from behind the glass” thing turned me off. We argued it to death, finally agreeing that we wouldn’t agree. I think it boiled down to cultural differences. Either that or the fact that he’s just a pervert.

We arrived in Hong Kong in the early afternoon and met up with George’s family. I had a few things to do – I was leaving the next day for Penang, Malaysia. I left George and his family, purchased some Malaysian Ringgits, confirmed my flight with Singapore Airlines, checked my e-mails... I thought of calling the Chinese girl that I had met at the dance club, but decided against it. I already had a full agenda for the evening, plus I wondered if she would even understand me; her English was bad and my Cantonese limited – there’s only so many times you can say “Hi, how are you?” “I’m fine” and “I have diarrhoea” before the conversation gets stale. I sure wasn’t going to invite George to translate, he’d try to get in my date’s pants.

Hong Kong at night

The trip to across to Central on the Star Ferry was mesmerizing, the neon from the towering high-rises shimmering multi-coloured lights off the water as we crossed the harbour in the dusk of early evening. It was a Friday night and it seems that everyone had the same ideas in mind – there was a queue waiting at the Peak tram terminus. The peak itself was packed with lovers, tourists, and photographers. I stayed an hour, watching darkness overcome Hong Kong, the lights waking up, transforming the city into an incredible living neon.

I met up with George and a gang of his Hong Kong friends in Lan Kwai Fong. This is obviously the ‘in’ part of town, there were many people out on the street milling around, beers in hand (there seems to be no restrictions to walking around Lan Kwai Fong with a beer going from bar to bar), the people young, mixed and attractive – it was obvious that this was the usual Friday night after-work, beer crowd. George and I went back to being buddies – he would meet me in Penang. In the meantime I looked forward to a few days on my own.

Hong Kong had been more than I had ever hoped for. I scribbled a few words down on a postcard on my way to the airport; ‘Words that best describe HK: visually breathtaking, busy,

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friendly, safe, organized, neat, great parks, Chinese, cell phones, pollution, sophisticated/crude, rich/poor, busy (again). Memorable.' The weather during the first three days in Hong Kong had been great – sunny, warm, very comfortable; but the last two days had been cool and rainy. I was ready for the tropics!

MALAYSIA

There is something sexy and intriguing about the name “Malaysia.” It’s mysterious – how many people do you know have been to Malaysia? This is the country that banned “Schindler’s List” and the cartoon “The Prince of Egypt” because they were deemed Zionist propaganda. More recently it also banned “Zoolander”, one of my favourite comedies, for portraying a plot to assassinate a Malaysian Prime Minister (Derek Zoolander, international supermodel, gets brainwashed by a fanatical fashion designer to kill the Prime Minister of Malaysia because of the latter’s abolition of child labour in the garment industry). There is obviously no room for comedy in Malaysian politics. An episode of “Friends” was banned because it portrayed “Casual sex, promiscuity amongst youth, pregnancy outside the institution of marriage, and prostitution”. The film “Daredevil” was banned because it encouraged youngsters to “Hero worship someone with a devil-sounding name.” This in a multicultural country inhabited by Malays, Chinese, Indians, as well as a whole bunch of indigenous tribes, a very tolerant society where freedom of religion is guaranteed because of the multicultural mix and where English, not even an official language, is the language that links the different ethnic groups. It is also one of the Asian Tigers, one of the most prosperous countries in South-East Asia, which counts the USA as one of its major trading partners. Conversely, it, and Malaysian Prime Minister Dr. Mahathir Mohammed, are among the most outspoken critics of western values (“Western decadence”) – blaming, among other things, “Western currency speculators” for the 1997 Asia crisis. More recently, Dr. Mohammed was among the most vocal critics of the Bush administration’s Iraq agenda.

Another thing; don’t even think of consuming or trafficking drugs during your visit to Malaysia. Individuals arrested in possession of 15 grams of heroin or 200 grams of marijuana are presumed by law of trafficking – the penalty is death by hanging. Amnesty international: “Over 150 people are believed to have been executed for drug offences in recent years. The real figures are not known owing to a lack of official statistics on the use of the death penalty.” I read a story of an 18 year-old Malaysian man who was caught growing a cannabis plant in his house. The poor guy was spared the death penalty but was condemned to life imprisonment, plus, as if that wasn’t enough, he was whipped six times with a cane (“Life Imprisonment? Mohammed, you are always such a softie – alright, but lets add 6 lashes so he learns a lesson...”)

Sex? There is no official position on prostitution and the male populace is well supplied by Filipina and Laotian girls smuggled in and forced to work in undercover brothels. The police turn a blind eye. However, it is against the law to have sex with a Muslim girl – as a foreigner you would be very quickly kicked out of the country. Although the country is very multicultural, the Malays control politics, and the country’s morality laws are shaped by Muslim values. You can screw anything else, just don’t touch a Muslim. Sex is quite a juicy subject in Malaysia, and it doesn’t get any better than the 1998 trial of Anwar Ibrahim. Anwar had long been groomed by Dr. Mohammed to be his successor, but the Asia crisis and economic policy however caused a

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rift between the two men. Conflict soon resulted in arrests, Mr. Anwar's adopted brother and Mr. Anwar's speech writer were both "Convicted of allowing themselves to be sodomized by Mr. Anwar" (BBC). These convictions were levelled before Mr. Anwar himself was ever charged with anything – he was subsequently charged with 5 cases of sexual misconduct (3 other men were said to have been sodomized), as well as charges of corruption and abuse of office. His sentence? 15 years in jail which he is currently serving. His adopted brother, who was supposedly sodomized, was charged for 6 years of jail plus 4 lashes (the moral of the story? Guess its what my mom always told me – "Don't let anybody stick a penis in your butt.") Mr. Anwar and his supporters say he is the victim of a smear campaign by Prime Minister Mohammed, who is "paranoid".

Hmm, a weird and wacky country – I was quite intrigued!

I wasn't actually thinking about banned movies, drugs, or Mr. Anwar's alleged fetish for sodomizing men when I got on that Singapore Airlines flight – I was focused on the most beautiful stewardesses I have ever seen. Beautiful, olive-skinned Malay women, dressed in colourful (and pleasantly tight) batik dresses, all slim and elegant with beautiful black hair. SIA, the airlines abbreviations, also stands for Sex In the Air in Singapore – the airline has a reputation for gorgeous stewardesses. I read up about a student in Singapore who was fined for following a SIA stewardess home and stealing some of her personal items. "Ong Su Ming, 26, grabbed a cabin bag belonging to Sekhri Anupama, 28, after following the uniformed flight attendant home in a taxi. Ong's lawyer said his client had a history of obsessive compulsive disorder and a fascination for SIA stewardesses; "Bizarre as it may seem, the Singapore Airlines girl represents to him that perfect girl that he wants to marry ... He has fantasies, including sexual fantasies, about girls from Singapore Airlines." The judge, probably being a man and understanding the young man's lusty behaviour, only fined Ong S\$1,000 (About \$ 600 US) which would be considered very lenient in Singapore – it is actually exactly the same fine that someone would get for dropping or selling/importing chewing gum. I wasn't going to go to the lengths of Mr. Ong – I was however trying to make up my mind whether or not I should buy one of the Barbie-sized Singapore Airlines stewardesses that they sell duty free aboard the plane. "Is it inflatable?" I almost asked the stewardess. I changed my mind – with my luck I would get searched by security upon entry into Malaysia and branded a pervert, subject to 10 lashes (Oh, yeah, plus life imprisonment.)

Anyway, I'm straying. The flight from Hong Kong to Singapore took 3 hours. There I waited an hour before taking another SIA flight on to Penang. An hour later we started our descent, the Andaman Sea beautifully blue and green below us. The island, hilly and lush with vegetation and palm trees, appeared, the high rises of Georgetown shining in the distance. Gliding over shacks and homes and all that lushness, it actually reminded me of parts of South-Central Africa, the smoke from small fires lazily rising in the warm, humid air.

Arriving in Penang

Penang was founded by British “Trader and adventurer” Francis Light in 1786. The guy was in actual fact something of a prick – actually, any guy titling himself “an adventurer” sounds like a pompous prick. Anyway, the deserted island was ceded to Light by the Sultan of Kedah in exchange for \$10,000 US annually and the promise of British military assistance against the Sultan’s enemies, the Siamese. Light reneged on the agreement, paying instead \$6,000 US a year and withholding the agreed upon services. The Sultan was forced to re-negotiate and finally ended up getting the original terms but only in exchange for additional land along the mainland coast. A pretty shitty ploy I think. Clearing the densely vegetated island was something else Light is famous for – he loaded a cannon with gold coins and fired it into the jungle. The natives, eager to find the coins, cleared the land. Before long, sufficient land had been cleared for a settlement and traders and merchants began to arrive. Over the following decades, the island attracted more than 10,000 settlers and traders, mostly Malays, Sumatrans, Indians and especially Chinese. That’s how Penang established itself as a major trading port for tea, spices, and cloth. It also explains the island’s multicultural mix – 59% of the population is Chinese, 33% Malay, and 8% Indian (Demographics for Malaysia as a whole; 57% Malay, 27% Chinese, 8% Indian, 8% others).

I was driven into town by a talkative and friendly Indian, a nice breeze of dry earth and vegetation washing over me in the back seat. Again it reminded me of Africa, it actually reminded me of the main roads in Lusaka (Zambia); large trees and shrubs bordering, and, in some places, forming a canopy over the road. What was different was the populace riding around in cars and motorcycles, all in varying degrees of browns, from the lightly skinned Malays to the darker Indians. I have to admit that I felt a bit intimidated being so white.

Booking a room at the Berjaya Georgetown Hotel had been a big mistake. A modern looking high-rise from the outside, it was old and musty inside, the wall-to-wall carpeting a sponge for the humidity and dust wafting through the main doors. The elevators appeared haunted (stopping/starting of their own accord, the doors suddenly clanking shut and tugging at my pant leg like a poodle with a hard-on) and the rooms were small and scruffy, a loud air-conditioner in the window, the same old, musty carpeting on the floor. The only good thing about the place was the view of the sun going down over the island, a beautiful sunset, an orange sun reflecting off the ocean and the high-rises of Georgetown.

Downtown Georgetown – Indian food, gays, Patricia Arquette

I headed downtown, the taxi dropping me off in the heart of Chinatown at the intersections of Lebuah Chulia and Jalan Penang, two of Georgetown's main arteries. It took about a minute for me to be accosted by two funny looking characters, not funny Ha-Ha, I mean funny-peculiar – one of them was short and looked decidedly feminine, the other looked normal; good-looking guy but he walked kind of funny.

“Hello, where are you from?”

“I'm from Canada”

“What's your name?”

“Frank.” They mentioned their names.

“Where are you going? Can we walk with you?”

“Yeah, that's okay – I'm looking for the Yasmeen Restaurant” (I had read up on this restaurant in LP)

“I will show you where it is” said the more normal looking of the two.

Walking, the short, feminine one said his good-byes. I couldn't help but notice the meaningful look and raising of the eyebrows he gave his friend. I was starting to get inklings, call them queer inklings, and I don't mean queer in a funny-bizarre way, I mean queer as in an Anwar-sodomy queer kind of way.

The Yasmeen Restaurant was more than anything an outdoor stand with small tables off the sidewalk.

“Can I sit down with you?” asked my queer friend.

“Sure, I don't mind.”

We spoke for a few minutes; he was on vacation from a university in Kuala Lumpur;

“I like to come here, meet some white men. I am gay”.

Pretty upfront I thought. “Ha, thanks, but I'm not gay. I like women” I said. We spoke for a few more minutes, I asked him what it was like being gay in Malaysia.

“We have to be careful. But here in Penang it's okay. Much more relaxed. Okay, I think I go.

Have a good time in Penang.” With that he got up and left, waving his good-byes. The food came at that moment – about the best Indian food I ever had in my life, the chicken was incredibly tender and the spices perfect, the naan bread was warm and doughy.

I took a walk. The buildings in Georgetown are mostly old, two story concrete buildings housing stores and small family-run restaurants. It was third-worldish after Hong Kong, some of the small streets quite dark and quiet, many stores closed at this hour. I saw temples, mosques, and hawkers selling food on the street. There were also a lot of bicycle rickshaws, usually an elderly Chinese man lounging in his rickshaw waiting for a client. “Want Massage?”

“Excuse me?”

“You want massage. Nice girl give you massage. Vely, vely good massage” he says this last part with a grin on his face.

“No thank you.”

When someone in Penang asks you if you want a massage there's much more than a massage

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being offered. And it's always asked by the Chinese rickshaw drivers. The destination for "a massage" is supposedly the Cathay Hotel – actually a renowned hotel; it played a starring role in the 1995 film "Beyond Rangoon." I saw that movie twice and really enjoyed it, Patricia Arquette's breasts were definitely memorable (bouncy, yet firm – there was definitely a party going on under that tight white t-shirt), it's also a great story about Aung San Suu Kyi's opposition to the military dictatorship in Burma (Myanmar). Good story in an exotic location, historic and relevant, exciting – and a great pair of breasts; I give it two thumbs up. Anyway, The Cathay Hotel has a massage center off to the side of the hotel which is quite popular, mostly with the local Chinese. From all accounts this is where you are taken for "a massage."

I passed by the roundabout intersecting Lebu Chulia and Jalan Penang and saw my gay friend, he waved at me, he looked like he wanted to come over and talk, but changed his mind. I walked a little more. Georgetown is not beautiful. It really isn't. Like I said, there's a lot of those two story concrete buildings. Keep an eye out for the trenches built next to the roads – I quickly determined that these cement water ducts were constructed to channel the water runoff during heavy rainfall. They are everywhere in Penang. But appearances aside, there were some quaint little restaurants and cafes where people (mostly tourists) were sitting down eating and drinking; places with rattan chairs and potted plants. There was a relaxed feel about Georgetown, you could see it by looking at the tourists walking around; dressed down – T-shirts, shorts, unshaven – a relaxed, bohemian atmosphere. Totally different from Hong Kong. I was suddenly happy and looking forward to doing a lot of relaxing.

I walked towards the intersection to take a taxi back to the hotel, spotting my gay friend again. He saw me and started walking towards me, intercepting me as I crossed the intersection. He looked nervous this time. He made a gesture with his hand and mouth; "Would you like me to suck your penis?"
"No, thank you" I replied.

I had a good laugh about it in the taxi with an Indian driver, "Always gays at that corner" he told me. I had never felt so desirable in my life. Boy, why don't women ever approach me like that? Can you imagine a woman just walking up to you and offering to suck your penis? And for free, only because it turns her on and she gets a kick out of it? Can you imagine that?

I went back to the hotel and quickly fell asleep. It had been an interesting day – a few hours in conservative Malaysia and I already knew where to go for "a massage" and some homosexual sex.

Kek Lok Si temple

It is advertised as "The largest Buddhist temple complex in Malaysia" and is located in the hills just outside Georgetown. It is magnificent; a large complex containing temples, pagodas, and gardens, full of golden Buddhas, burning incense, and orange-robed monks. The complex is alive with vegetation, the sounds of tropical birds chirping (there are a few peacocks on the grounds – as opposed to a few cocks peeing on the grounds...ok, that joke really sucks), and great views – you can see across the eastern part of Penang, the city of Georgetown, and the sea beyond. These

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were the tropics I had so longed to see; it also explained the streak of sweat running down the crack of my pants. To this day I've never felt such discomfort from heat and humidity – in Africa it was a dry heat, here it was a humid, humid heat. It was only when I climbed up to the top of the great padoga tower that I had mild relief from a light breeze. The views were fantastic and left me with a lasting impression of Kek Lok Si.

Batu Ferringui – beach and beer

Batu Ferringhi, translated literally as “Foreigner’s Rock”, also known as Ferringhi Beach, is on the north part of the island, a half-hour drive on a sinuous road along the hilly coast. I had originally planned to stay a second night in Georgetown, but the hotel and the heat made me change my plans. I guess that’s why this area became developed – too many gringos like me who just couldn’t take the humidity. What better solution than to stick them on a beach far enough away so the locals won’t be offended by the sight of ugly, white bodies lying around like beached whales. Then call it “Foreigner’s Rock”, like it’s a clearly-defined game park, nudist colony or mental institution. Anyway, I didn’t care, after all the sweating I did that morning I was going to laze on the beach and have tropical breezes washing over me while rehydrating myself to normal beer PH-levels.

I checked into the Casuarina Beach Resort Hotel, a beautiful place right on the beach. The room itself was large and clean with a big TV and a balcony. It was expensive (US\$60), but very comfortable. There was not much to do but laze at the beach, drink beer and eat satay (skewed meat served with spicy peanut sauce). It was quiet with very few other tourists, certainly no sexy babes prancing around in bikinis – which was ok; I drank more beer and ate more satay while burping and farting to my heart’s content. I even scratched myself a few times. Life was good.

Sundown over Ferringhi beach was the most beautiful I have ever seen, on any beach. It is a thing to celebrate; the previously empty beach suddenly became alive with Malays, Chinese, and Indians. Families eating, having picnics on large blankets. Children were playing, running in the sand, making castles. Adolescents had organized soccer games and were kicking the ball around on the beach. And above the talking and happy cries, there was the wailing of exotic Muslim chants from minarets at a nearby mosque. All this with a simply incredible sunset, blue and orange streaks in the sky, a cluster of clouds swirling above in different shades of orange and red. It was absolutely fantastic, like hell boiling over.

Batu Ferringhi is at its busiest at night. That’s when the main road; a strip of hotels, tourist shops, internet cafes, and restaurants (because that’s what Batu Ferringui is – just a bunch of establishments lining the road) becomes a lively market. Hawkers set up stands and sell almost everything under the sun; imitation CDs, watches, T-shirts, computer games, silks, leather works, Thai masks... I browsed a bit but was tired – bought a 6 pack of Anchor Beer (brewed in Singapore) and went back to my room where I fell asleep watching TV in bed.

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People, sunsets, crab & beer

I have never met people as trusting and generous as the people of Penang. They are just embarrassingly nice. I strolled into a barbershop close to the hotel for a haircut, arriving just as the barber was finishing up with a customer. A Malay man was seated and reading a newspaper; he had clearly been awaiting his turn. I made to sit down next to him in line; “Go ahead sir”, he motioned to me, indicating the barber’s chair as the other customer left, “go ahead.”
“Oh no, you were here before me. I’m in no rush” I said, a bit embarrassed.
“No sir, you are on vacation. I have nothing to do, I can stay here and talk to my friend all day. Please, you go ahead.”

There were also the taxi drivers. How often can you actually say something nice about a taxi driver? Taxi drivers in Penang are different – it happened a few times, like when I went to the Kek Lok Si temple, when I took out my wallet to pay. “Will you be going back sir?” the driver had asked

“Yes, I will stay here a few hours and go back to the hotel.”
“I will drive you back. You can pay me then.” It was so weird that you just felt like giving them a slap on the head (“Wake up! Didn’t your mom tell you that people are evil and just want to screw you? Get out of this little fantasy world of yours!”) It was truly bizarre.

There was another incredible sunset on my 2nd evening in Batu Ferringhi, this time the sky was dominated by bluish and purplish hues, cut by a warm-yellowish/red rainbow, the colours reflecting off the gentle waves. Again families were out, beautiful Muslim chants in the background from the mosque. These two evenings encapsulated my impressions of Penang. I saw a traditional, family-oriented, multicultural society dominated by tolerance and respect. On the beaches I would see Malays having supper, the women and girls wearing beautiful silk dresses, a few meters away a group of Indian kids were jumping around in the water, wearing cheap-looking shorts and T-shirts, but having such a wonderful time you couldn’t help smiling. It all seemed so simple and innocent and I loved these evenings sitting on the beach watching the sun go down with everybody else. These people seemed so honest and friendly, so uncorrupted. Just really good people.

I went to eat Indian food again – the Indian food in Penang is fantastic and in my opinion much better than either Malay or Chinese cuisine. I screwed up this time, choosing the crab curry dish – I spent the next hour with one of those bloody little two-pronged forks trying to pry meat out of holes the size of a straw. I gave up in frustration and went back to my hotel room where I had a hot evening lined up with what was left of my Anchor Beer. We fell asleep together watching TV.

Ukrainian girl / Penang Hill

A broker I deal with in Chicago has a joke about Ukrainian girls:
Question; “What’s the difference between a Ukrainian woman and a catfish?”
Answer: “One has whiskers and stinks, the other is a fish”

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The girl I was looking at didn't look like a fish and didn't smell like one either. She was actually quite beautiful. But not too bright – we were the only two white people of about 15 waiting for the “funicular railway” to go up Penang Hill (the funicular railway is a fancy word for a really slow tram.) The blonde chick was fawning over a Malay baby in a stroller, making funny monkey faces while talking to him like a dog. She was giggling and laughing like a moron, all the while taking pictures of him. The Malays around us didn't look impressed. The baby looked at her like he was going to throw up and I think the mother wanted to slap her. She was an embarrassment to white people everywhere and I just wanted to hide. The tram finally arrived, everyone piling in. I somehow ended up sitting next to the blonde chick.

“Where do you come from?” I asked, knowing that the answer would forever prejudice my perception of her ethnicity.

“I'm from Kiev, in the Ukraine” she said, “Do you know where that is?”
drumroll...

“Isn't it close to Chernobyl?” Kaplow!

Going up Penang Hill, which honestly was a molehill compared to the Peak, was excruciatingly slow. About 45 minutes later (it was by then dark) we got to the top of Penang Hill. I was supposed to meet George at the airport in less than an hour. Shit.

“When is your next railcar down?” I asked the teller at the booth.

“In 5 minutes”

I looked at the views from Penang Hill for 5 minutes. I'm sorry to say that after the vistas of Hong Kong, the views of Georgetown were disappointing. The almost two hour return trip up Penang Hill had been a complete waste of time.

George 2 – the water trench

George had arrived on the Cathay Pacific flight from Hong Kong. All dressed up, he looked like he was already suffering from the tropical heat in his leather jacket. “Leather jacket! George, this is the tropics,” I told him, “I hope you brought some shorts” (reminds me of a scene in *George of the Jungle* where one of the bad guys shows up in Africa wearing a complete leather body suit.

“This is Africa,” says his friend, “you have to wear cotton. Cotton breathes.” Anyway, it's the way he said it...) I think George was happy to be in Malaysia – he had spent the last three days touring with his family around Hong Kong and the New Territories. “So what's happening in Penang?”

“Well, we have a tour of Penang Hill tomorrow” (I had arranged a hike up the hill.)

“Cool. What's Penang nightlife like? Did you get laid in the last couple of days?”

“Nope. Haven't really gone out, it's not really that kind of place. But I know where to go if you want homosexual sex or a Chinese massage.”

We went back to Batu Ferringhi, the taxi taking a route around the mountainous western part of the island. He changed into shorts and we went out for supper

“Where's the nightlife around here?” It was already close to midnight.

“Hmm, there's a few small bars further down, there's a Bob Marley Reggae Club. I also saw some ads for a couple of discos further down the road.”

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We walked down the main road, browsing to look at the stuff sold by hawkers, then came across a big hotel which advertised “the most happening disco in Batu Ferringhi.” It was closed – would be open on Saturday though! Unfortunately today was Tuesday and neither of us would be here Saturday.

“Shit man, nightlife around here sucks.”

“Yeah, I guess so. We can try the Reggae Club,” I suggested. It was right across the street. We crossed the lawn, towards the road, I stepped over another water trench – “Arrgg !! Fuck!!” George had fallen in the 3-foot deep trench. He was moaning and groaning, bleeding like a pig. We went back to the hotel, washed his knee off in the bathroom, got some big bandages from the front desk. At least there was nothing broken. All bandaged up, we went to a clinic down the street – the nurse cleaned up George’s knee and bandaged it up properly.

Great start.

We went to the Reggae club which was dead. I found out that night that Batu Ferringhi wasn’t so great for nightlife, I could feel that George was disappointed. I realized I would have to gear up to keep him entertained the next few nights. The pressure was on. Obviously sleeping with a 6-pack didn’t cut it for George.

Botanical Gardens / Hiking Penang Hill / Marleen

The Botanical Gardens are large, lush and quite beautiful. We didn’t have much time to explore them very thoroughly but we saw that there were lots of plants and flowers, which is always a good thing in a Botanical garden. There were also a lot of monkeys.

Marlene met us at the gate to the gardens. She worked in the hotel’s gift shop; we had talked and when I had asked her about organized hikes, she invited me to visit Penang Hill. She was in her early 40’s, a Malay but Catholic, married with 2 boys. She also liked to blab non-stop: “I’m sorry I’m late, I had to cook and feed the husband and kids. Then I had to clean up – my husband never does anything in the house. He just works, works, works, at the hotel then he comes home and does nothing because he is tired. Then sometimes he has to go back to work at night. I wish he would come and walk with me but he is so busy. These walks are my saviour. Praise God, I don’t know what I would do if I could not come out here and hike, I love nature...” George later told me that if he were her husband that he would stick electrodes to her tongue, maybe give her a little shock when she talked too much. Conversely, switching the charge would render her tongue an energy producing device that could power some of the household appliances. Mind you, these were George’s ideas and I told him, in no uncertain terms, that I thought he was a goddamn genius.

We started up a trail in the woods, Marlene had latched onto George and was talking away. The soil was reddish and shaped by water runoff from the rains. We were surrounded by luxuriant plant life, mostly bushes, until we got to higher ground where we found ourselves walking along a trail through the trees, large cliffs and boulders off to the sides, nice views of the island all around. After about an hour we came to a small lookout with shacks, tables, and chairs, a few people were gathered around talking, some Chinese, a few Malay, one Indian. It was like a

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Benetton ad with less attractive people. They drank tea and greeted Marlene. She told George and I that the station was a co-operative effort by residents, a place to drink, have a snack, or just relax and socialize. We had beautiful views of jungle and hills, Georgetown laid out below us. We encountered more community-stations descending the hill and were impressed – besides great views, the hike gave us a sense of the love of nature and community spirit of Malaysians. We thanked Marlene and, after a half hour of goodbyes / hugs / well-wishes / complaints about her husband / reminders of the evils of drinking too much alcohol, wandered back to the hotel.

“Trendy” night out in Georgetown

I was getting dressed, putting a pair of shorts and a polo shirt. “You’re not going to wear that, are you?” said George “C’mon man, lets get dressed up.”

“Georgetown isn’t the kind of place where you get dressed up, it’s more laid back. It’s not like Hong Kong. I was thinking we’d go to a restaurant, check out a couple of small bars, people are friendly. And what’s wrong with what I’m wearing?”

“Ahh man, c’mon, maybe we’ll find a trendy, hot bar. Put on some pants at least, c’mon man.”

I was wearing pants when we went downtown, the taxi dropping us off close to the gay roundabout. I showed George a couple of the small, comfortable restaurants that I had seen on my first night.

“Frank, this is not what I had in mind. C’mon, lets find something trendy. This sucks.” I kept my mouth shut, remembering that he hadn’t gotten laid in Macau because of me.

“Trendy” was the Gurney Hotel, a fancy modern hotel outside the city center. There we ate KFC-style fried chicken. It wasn’t any better than KFC and was triple the price of the fantastic food I had sampled in old Georgetown. Who the hell comes to Penang to eat fried chicken? The hotel was hosting the “Miss Chinatown” pageant that night – we ended up drinking beer in a large, jam-packed hall, the clientele mostly young, Chinese, and male. They weren’t very friendly, cliquish in their small groups and laughing amongst themselves but unresponsive and withdrawn whenever George and I tried to engage in conversation. George and I ended up drinking alone, watching some pretty girls strutting down a runway in bikinis (!) while the males around cheered and whistled, brave in their numbers. It all put me in a shitty mood – you can find this kind of scene anywhere you go if you look for it; young, “cool” people, trying to impress with fancy clothes, shallow greetings and contrived conversations. But it nevertheless disappointed me to see it in Penang. And I don’t know if it’s just me, but when I see a guy wearing a pink golf shirt with the collar up, wearing sunglasses in a near dark hall, well, it just pisses me off . Makes me want to grab him by his gelled hair and crunch his face into my knee. I guess I’m just not much of a people person. George tells me that I’m not very tolerant sometimes – that’s when I usually tell him to fuck himself. I think I told him to fuck himself that night.

Penang tourist attractions – cannons & dragons

It was our last day in Penang and we decided to take a taxi tour around Georgetown. Fort Cornwallis, one of the city's most popular tourist sites, was our first stop. It is an old fort with views over the bay, located on the spot where Francis Light and his crew landed in 1786. Interestingly enough, the fort has never been engaged in battle. I think it's a bit of a girlie fort. Get this; it is famous – and this is would really be embarrassing if you were a fort – for an old cannon, the Sri Rambai cannon, that the locals believe to hold magical procreative powers. “Women desiring children will have their wish fulfilled if they place flowers in the cannon's barrel and offer prayers” explains my Insight Guide to Malaysia. So basically it's a fort where women come to pray. Which is actually kind of sexy – I could imagine all those women, hot and bothered under their silks, on their knees praying in front of this large phallic symbol, offering gifts in the hope of getting impregnated ... “Hey George, hide in the cannon and jump out when a chick puts flowers in there. Trust me, you might get laid.”

We visited the Wat Chayamangkalaram, a beautiful Thai Buddhist temple (well worth the visit), passed by Georgetown's old Municipal building (1800's colonial building – didn't inspire more than a “ah, nice – keep on driving”), then went to the Snake Temple where we had the opportunity to have snakes draped all over us. It seems that these snakes represent the mythical dragons of Chinese folklore. Most people don't know this, but Chinese folklore brought us the famous greeting “Hey, how's it hangin'?” and its equally famous reply “It's dragin'!”. Ok, I'm lying. In any case, the snakes are, supposedly, drugged up by the incense in the temple and have, so they say, been de-fanged. Anyway, that's what I told George and it must have been at least partially true because he never got bitten.

We had a quiet and civil last evening in Batu Ferringhi. I was going to Thailand the next day while George had a very early flight to Singapore – he had friends there who loved to party, his buddy Mike was dating a Singapore Airlines Stewardess. He was “sure to get laid.” Okay, so I was boring. Knowing what I know now, we should have never met up in Penang, it's definitely not the place for a couple of single men. But, nightlife aside, I had enjoyed my stay here; the food is incredible, the people friendly, it has great temples (the Kek Lok Si temple is superb), it also has magnificent sunsets. I loved the mix of cultures and watching the sun set with the Muslim chants in the background. Penang is very exotic.

PHUKET, THAILAND

The Malaysian Airlines 737 took off, leaving lush and hilly Penang for a 45 minute flight over the emerald waters of the Andaman Sea. The final approach into Phuket was over flat, palm-tree covered ground. It struck me instantly how everything here is totally different from Penang. Phuket airport, for one, is as modern as can be. It has a tourist office full of glossy pamphlets promoting a multitude of tourist attractions around the island. They were very helpful in helping me book a hotel – I chose the Salathai resort on Patong beach, the most happening beach in Phuket. Taxis from the airport are all regulated; you prepay a teller, she gives you a ticket and you get in a cab. It takes 45 minutes along a grand, modern auto route to get from the airport to Patong beach. One thing I quickly noticed was that the taxi driver was not friendly – I probably wouldn't have been so sensitive if I hadn't just come from Penang where a lengthy conversation with the driver was the norm. Friendliness aside, most Thais don't speak a word of English – although the most touristy place in all of my travels, Thailand would be the most challenging when it came to communicating with the locals (Thailand is the only place in South-East Asia never colonized by a European power, so there's no legacy of any Western language in place).

Patong is very touristy – driving in, I saw restaurants, bars, travel agencies, photo shops, and lots of people; Thais on mopeds, tourists walking to and from the beach with their bathing suits on, many lobster-red from the sun. I also saw a lot of attractive girls, both tourist and locals. In many instances I would see a male tourist walking hand-in-hand with a Thai girl. This was so different from Penang. I was dropped off in front of the Salathai resort. It was a gorgeous place with an open lobby off the street and a beautiful swimming pool just beyond. For 1,800 Baht, about US 40, I was really impressed (although expensive by Thai standards, it is still cheaper than Malaysia.) I was greeted at the reception by a beautiful Thai girl, had my bags taken from me by an attentive bellhop, was asked to sit down and given a cocktail as I filled in my registration information. When advising me of the rules and regulations of the hotel, the girl slipped in: “Should you bring in any girls for company during your stay, there will be a fee of \$10 extra per night.” Wow, this was different.

I spent the afternoon on one of the most beautiful beaches that I have ever seen in my life. Patong beach has white sand, fine white sand against a backdrop of emerald water and palm trees. It was crowded with mostly white tourists; under parasols they lay, happy and overweight, reading magazines and drinking beer. Others walked the beach, their bodies young and fit. The women were gorgeous, many were topless – the whole scene made me wonder if I had just stepped onto the beaches of France or Spain. Only the vendors – vendors selling fruits, t-shirts, beer, ice cream, watches, and paintings (among other things) – gave away that I was in Thailand. They wore shirts with large numbers on the back to identify themselves as vendors, the women wearing scarves on their heads, the men with hats as protection against the broiling sun. Actually seeing the fat, white tourists being served by the sweltering brown natives bothered me. It also really pissed me off the way some of the tourists would wave them away or ignore them when solicited – we Westerners can really be condescending fucks with our high and mighty attitudes. And the way we disrespect other cultures, taking no consideration as to their sensitivities...my eyes settled on a pretty and topless blonde playing some kind of racquet game on the beach, her

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boobs bouncing around in all directions. I ordered a beer, suddenly thinking that Phuket was a pretty damn fine place.

Modern and touristy, rich and manicured – maybe a short flight, but Penang and Phuket are a world apart.

Thai cuisine-a-Go-Go

Thai cuisine has its origins in Buddhism – accordingly meat (usually Chicken, beef or pork) is not served in big chunks, but instead shredded and laced with herbs and spices. Fried with curries and vegetables (frying being a Chinese influence, the curries an Indian) it is often served on a base of rice or noodles. Soups, often using a coconut milk base, usually accompany the main course. Ok, so it sounds pretty ordinary, nowhere as exotic as Chinese food where it seems everything from the tongue of a duck to the sphincter of an electric eel might appear on your plate – but Thai cuisine has its own particularities. Chief among them are bugs; Crickets, water beetles, worms, scorpions...Crickets are especially popular as snacks, their bodies crunchy and quite tasty after having been fried.

I mention the bugs because, after a delicious meal of Pad Thai (rice noodles with shrimp, garlic, all spiced up with chillies), I somehow found myself in Patong strip joint watching naked Thai girls while eating a bagful of fried crickets. I was in the “Valhalla”, a Las Vegas-like Viking fort which contains a hotel, restaurant, a swimming pool (where they have wild pool parties), and an “Odin’s cave”, a discotheque/go-go club (check it out on www.valhalla-th.com, “A man’s dream ... is a place where you can watch nice girls, drink an ice-cold beer and be just what you are ... a man” states the site. Wow, sounds like a Budweiser commercial).

I was sitting there eating crickets and drinking a “Famous Thor Hammer Punch,” the house specialty (hey, I was already thor from looking at the girls...) It was still early in the evening and there were only two of us – me and an old guy (obviously a pervert) – all the while contemplating the combination of strippers and food. There are places in Bangkok that I’ve heard about (called “No Hands” restaurant) where a naked girl serves you food while sitting on your lap. The Japanese (the biggest deviants around it seems, with their schoolgirl prostitutes and cartoon porn) have “Body Sushi” restaurants where you can eat sushi from the body of a naked woman. And if you think it’s only an Asian thing and that THEY are just a bunch of freaks, think about our strip clubs in the West – most fancy strip joints offer buffet service, you can have a heaping plate of smoked meat or roast beef while some chick is spreading her butt cheeks right in front of your face, all the while moaning “aiii baby, looks better going in than coming out...”. Ok, that’s gross. In any case, The Valhalla wasn’t very good – the show was slow and boring, the girls so-so, the music lousy. I checked “go to strip joint” off my to-do list and departed with the remaining crickets in my pocket.

Patong at night / Thai box / effeminate boys

Patong is full of little bars, hostess bars, go-go bars, discos... There are souvenir shops everywhere selling the same stuff as in Penang – watches, CDs, T-shirts, computer games, silks, leather works, masks, toys, beads... everything. Along the main stretch, Thaweewong Road (the beach road), there are restaurants, hotels, as well as Indian tailor shops; the Indian tailors are a pain – if you get within reaching distance they try to lead you in by the arm and you have to smack them. Walking down Thaweewong Road brings you to Bangla Road. Here is the heart of Patong and the action gets pretty raunchy – there are hostess bars all along the road, bars full of girls yelling as you walk by “handsome man, come for beer, please mister handsome man” I saw a few white guys in there, smiles on their faces, girls hanging all over them like those little plastic monkeys we had as kids.

Walking down Bangla road, I heard yelling and cheering. There was an open-air stadium under which a ring, a couple of fighters, and a crowd of onlookers were visible. Thai boxing, officially called Muay Thai, makes western boxing pale by comparison -opponents hit each other with fists, knees, elbows, and feet. There is a ritual preceding the fight in which the fighters perform a dance (I later read that the ritual offers homage to their teachers – and no, I don’t mean their kindergarten teachers.) The dance is accompanied by very loud music which can only be described as the sound of a very loud and angry mosquito stuck in your ear canal. Once the dance and music end, the gong rings to signal the beginning of the fight. The fighters then start whacking each other silly. The action never stopped and most of the fights went the scheduled 10 rounds. Afterwards, the two combatants would circulate around the crowd (there were about 250 people sitting around the ring) and shake hands and collect handouts; by Thai standards they must have been pretty well to do. What I actually found the most interesting about Muay Thai was observing the local Thais. When fighting, the whole family of a fighter would congregate, standing up, in their fighter’s corner. Brothers and fathers would cheer loudly “Aiii!! Aiii!! Aiii!!” and gesticulate wildly, extolling their family member on. Mothers always looked worried, hands up to their face, relaxing only when the fight was over. Watching one family, I noticed something particular; one of the boys, about 17 years old and presumably a brother, was dressed up as a girl – make-up on the face, a ponytail, long coloured nails on the hands. It wasn’t the first time I was to see this, there seemed to be many effeminate boys in Thailand. But it was interesting to see the interaction between him and the other men and women in the family; they treated him like everyone else; brothers and sisters laughing with him, his father talking to him excitedly between rounds, a grandmother standing quietly next to him. I found it both heart warming and educative; I had read about ‘traditional’ Thai culture and Buddhism and had made certain assumptions. A night of Muay Thai, of seeing the music and dance leading up to the fight, of watching the interaction among Thais, opened my eyes. It was a highlight. Muay Thai is something that I fell in love with that night.

Attractions around Phuket – zoo food stories

I hired a taxi driver for a tour of Phuket. Both the Butterfly Farm and Aquarium are pleasant, although unspectacular. Then I went to the Phuket Zoo. The Zoo is large and has a wide variety of animals: tigers, monkeys, elephants (they have an elephant show where the elephants kick soccer balls into goals and slam basketballs into hoops) and lots of birds. “DO NOT EAT THE ANIMALS” read a large sign next to the heron cage. I scratched my head to that one. The herons looked fidgety – but it couldn’t possibly be that Thais come in here and eat the animals, right? (“oh look, the Niratappanasai family is having a barbecue in the ostrich compound again”) It reminded me of my last visit to Zambia in 1988, where I had lived for several years as a child. The economy had gone downhill in the ten years since living there, so much so that the local population would go to almost any lengths to get food, especially meat. One story, which had happened just prior to my visit, involved a couple of men who decided to sneak into a nearby game reserve and steal the meat left by the game wardens for the animals (“Hey Mimbuku, we take food of animals and have party with those two really big-assed girls from the village”). They were found dead the next morning, chewed and gnawed through by a pride of lions.

I moved on to another section of the zoo. There, next to the crocodile pool, was another puzzling sign; “DANGER. DO NOT BEAT THE ANIMALS.” The crocodiles were huge, their jaws gaping wide, and I was starting to wonder how crazy Thais get when they drink. I wasn’t sure if the signs were simply a result of bad translation, but I left the zoo with a resolution to never pick a fight with a Thai.

There are several lookouts on the west coast of the island where you can get a good idea of the geography of Phuket; bay after bay after bay, each making up one of the beach villages (Karon, Kata, and Patong.) Again, the views were nice but I would not categorize them as being spectacular or even worth the detour. I finished off my tour with a stop at the largest Buddhist temple on Phuket. It was ok. I have to admit that, apart from the zoo, I was not that impressed by the attractions around the island.

The afternoon was spent on Patong beach. Out in the bay lay two large vessels, the closest being a HUGE multi-level cruise ship. Further out, a US warship was anchored off the bay. US Navy, stationed off Phuket? Of all places, why here? I would venture to guess it’s so that the sailors can fool around with the Thai bar chicks. Those girls must be sick of American semen, err, seamen.... Anyway (okay, bad joke), forget the warship off in the horizon – there were some incredible looking women around. A melting pot of beautiful women. Patong is like the United Nations of beaches: people of all nationalities, languages I couldn’t identify in some cases. Thai vendors circulated among the tourists. The action on that beach never stops.

Patong beach is a microcosm of Phuket. The island is a decadent tourist heaven – built up, commercial, with it’s beautiful beaches and raunchy nightlife, it is NOT your typical Thai beach town. Many will say it depicts the absolute worst of Thailand – all I have to say to that is that it is a fun place to stay for a few days, especially coming after Malaysia.

Phi-Phi Islands – ‘The Beach’

I would usually never book a hotel in advance but was assured by a travel agent in Phuket that Phi Phi was always busy, that I would have a hard time booking a hotel upon arrival (“Phi Phi vely touristy, better book ahead, more cheap, cheap”). So I pre-booked a place for 1,500 baht (about \$33 US), a great deal so I was told.

The ferry left the Phuket ferry terminal early the next morning. The geography started to change about an hour after leaving the pier; whereas Phuket was lush and relatively flat, further out the scenery is highlighted by rocky outcrops jutting out of the sea. The geography gets more dramatic further out, the outcrops becoming imposing rock faces that loomed over the ferry.

About two and a half hours from Phuket are the Phi Phi islands. There are 2 large islands in the Phi Phi group – Phi Phi Don is the main one and the only one with accommodation.. The second largest island, Phi Phi Ley (clearly visible as the ferry came up to Phi Phi Don), is a natural reserve and is totally void of any construction. It is much wilder and looks like a huge, intimidating mass of rock shooting straight up from the sea. I had read that within Phi Phi Ley’s cliffs are coves with clear, shallow water as well as a network of caves, the most notable being the “Viking Cave”. Phi Phi Ley is actually famous – it is on this island that 2000 film ‘The Beach’ with Leonardo DiCaprio was filmed (not recommended.)

Rounding the cliffs of Phi Phi Don, the pier came into view. The island was magnificent, the beach a sparkling white with large palm trees everywhere. The ends of the island are dominated by massive cliffs, between the cliffs are two moon-shaped coves with beautiful beaches separated by only a few hundred feet. On the beaches and in the middle of the island is the town. It made me think of pictures I have seen of Tahiti and Bora Bora, it was that beautiful. Docking, I took the ramp off the ferry and realized that pre-booking had been a mistake; the pier was full of touts competing for tourists “Have room for 800 baht sir.” Walking around, I found that the resort where I had booked, the Phi Phi Viewpoint Resort, was on the furthest end of the beach on the other side of the island. It was a disappointment, the cabins the most decrepit looking that I had seen. The room was very rustic, comprising of a lonely looking bed in a large, empty room, a single white light bulb hanging from the ceiling on a cord, a fan right above the bed. There was a separate bathroom, a rudimentary unflushable toilet (there was a bucket next to it) and a shower head but no hot water. Taped to the back of the bungalow door were a few memorable rules;

Rule # 4. “Please do not cook or boil in the room.”

Rule # 5. “The room use for stay, relax and rest and not for party or other objection”

Rule #6. “Feeding pet in the room is forbidden”

Rule #8. “Please keep quit in the room because your noise annoy other”

The room and its price (ok, so I had just been royally screwed) aside, the Phi Phi Viewpoint Resort did have beautiful views of the bay. It was halfway up the cliffs from the beach, remote and lonely in its location, surrounded by palm trees and shrubs. It was actually almost scary – I was on the porch, watching an incredible sunset, pink hues reflecting off the water, when a ruckus suddenly started up around me. It was the noise of bugs, millions of them – within a

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minute the sound was so loud that I almost ran into the bungalow, expecting a wave of locusts to swoop down and hook their horny jaws in my skin, to tear me apart like a vulture on a dead, bloody carcass that's been putrefying for days...okay, maybe I'm exaggerating.

The evening was spent walking the network of small pedestrian streets on Phi Phi Don. There are many restaurants, bars, and souvenir shops in town – of course there are no cars. It was very quaint and peaceful after Phuket; no Indian tailors, no bar girls, or strip bars – actually I could have used a girlfriend here, it was very romantic sort of place and I was kind of wistful seeing couples walking around hand-in-hand. If there would have been an escort service on the island I would have been the first to call it, just for the company of a pretty girl holding my hand over supper (“Hello, yes, is this Phi Phi 911-Hot Girls? Do you have a mulatto Brazilian girl available in the next hour?”) Not that I could impress any girl very much with where I was staying. I went back to my shack, halfway up the cliffs, and read for the first time on my vacation, quite enjoying the peacefulness of Phi Phi.

Phi Phi Ley – haemorrhoids and Bird's Nest Soup

I woke up early the next day to a cloudy, overcast sky and arranged for a longboat tour of Phi Phi Ley. It was about 8 am and we bounced over choppy waves to the forbidding looking island. I sat in the front and wondered if the boatman was intentionally torturing me, each bump creating a new set of haemorrhoidic twins on my anus. Phi Phi Ley was wild and beautiful with incredible hidden coves among immense limestone cliffs. I swam, hiked in the lush interior of the island and visited the “Viking Cave” – so named because there are ancient paintings of boats in the cave which resemble the long-boats of the Vikings. The cave is home to thousands of swifts (small birds) who build their nests in the very high reaches of the cave –it is so high that you can't see most of the roof, but the “tweet, tweet” of the birds can be heard. Bird dropping seemed to fall precariously close. Ladders have been erected in the cave and are used to collect the gelatinous nests of the swifts which are used to make ‘Bird's Nest Soup,’ a Chinese delicacy. The nests are made of “Seaweed glued together by the swift's saliva and the remains of small fish.” It supposedly tastes rather rubbery and bland, but, as with all Chinese delicacies, Bird's Nest Soup claims to have ‘aphrodisiac powers.’ (again, using the boner factor to explain away the taste..) Actually, I get excited just thinking about seaweed held together by a combination of saliva, dead fish remains, and bird droppings. Eeech!

It wasn't the nicest day, the waves thumped the small boat and those huge, vertical cliffs seemed menacingly close. They were like castle walls, looming and forbidding. Dark birds circled high above the cliffs against a backdrop of threatening clouds. Phi Phi Ley was beautiful, yet mysterious and scary. I was happy to get back to Phi Phi Don and dry land.

Krabi / Railey Beach – Amanda & the transexuals

I took the ferry early that afternoon and went off to Krabi; 1 ½ hours away from Phi Phi. What they don't tell you is that you are dumped in Krabi town; a small, featureless town on the mainland. From there you have to arrange additional transport to one of the islands around Krabi – I went to a travel agency, booked a room on Railey Island, then was told to wait at the pier for the longboat shuttle. I waited, and waited, and waited... a couple of young Thai men came to the pier, got in their longboat and asked me if I needed transport. I told them I was waiting for a longboat to Railey "No is longboat, too late, we take you – no expensive."

"No, no thank you" I said.

They sailed away, turning and laughing in my direction, no doubt I was just a stupid white guy waiting at the pier for a non-existent boat that would never come.

I was soon joined by another guy, Japanese I think, who seemed to be waiting for the same boat – he wasn't friendly. He kind of grunted a non-committal "Fuck you" grunt when I asked him if he was going to Railey, then went to the furthest corner of the pier, standing aloof listening to his walkman. Here I was, on this stupid pier with the unfriendliest asshole I had met on this trip.

The driver (or steerer, or whatever you call them) of the boat came along soon after, looking like he had just been woken up. With him was a couple; a very pretty blonde girl, mid 20s, with a stunning smile and beautiful blue eyes – my heart kind of leapt into my throat. She was accompanied by an older man, mid to late 40s with greyish hair but very good-looking. My heart sank. I was quite envious of this man, looking as good as he did at his age with a beautiful girl on his arm. Climbing on a longboat is tricky; I had to grimp along the narrow end of the longboat – which was bouncing up and down in the waves – from the side of the pier to the safety of the benches. Behind me was the girl, her companion holding one hand, she was leaning forward, her feet on the plank... I gave her a hand and helped her in. Falling beside me in the boat, she flashed me a beautiful smile and thanked me. She had an utterly charming British accent and I suddenly hoped her companion would fall off the narrow ledge into the water and drown. He must have read my mind because he waved my hand away when I offered help. He made it across however, despite my prayers to Slippy (The little known Slippery God) and we all settled into the benches of the longboat – the British couple in the front, I was just behind, the surly Japanese laid himself out a couple of benches in the back, still listening to his walkman. We cleared the dock, the boatman at the hull steering the longboat.

Actually it was the blonde girl who started the conversation. We compared notes on Southern Thailand – she had just arrived from Peninsular Malaysia. In fact, she had been traveling for the last 6 months, starting in Australia, making her way through Indonesia, into Singapore, Malaysia, and now Thailand. Her name was Amanda and her companion's name was Cyril and although I had originally wished him death, I quickly warmed to him; he was very friendly, outgoing, and didn't seem at all concerned that Amanda was focusing her attention on me. Actually I liked him even more when she told me that he was her father. I had a totally enjoyable boat ride with them, talking about our respective travels around the Orient.

The last part of the 45 minute boat ride was through Phi Phi-like geography. Railey Island came up and was as rocky, if not rockier, than Phi Phi. We pulled up to a pier on a sparkling white beach. I was sad the boat ride was over and wished Amanda and Cyril a good vacation. I hoisted

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the backpack and followed the path from the pier into the interior of a small island, small bungalows off to the sides of the path hidden amongst lush vegetation and high palm trees. A three minute walk brought me to another beach, a wider beach with an incredible view of jagged outcrops, layered halfway up their heights by lush vegetation (A picture of this view is actually used in Lonely Planet's South-East Asia guide – 10th edition, P.33). It was just amazingly beautiful and unspoilt. I found the hotel where I had reserved and was led to a gorgeous, modern bungalow equipped with a mini bar and a colour TV; absolute luxury – for the same cost as the place I had stayed in Phi Phi (about \$35 US). I took a hot shower, changed, and went out to discover Railey.

The main beach in Railey is wide and beautiful, bungalows and restaurants set back along the sand. Walking , I was taken aback seeing what looked like transsexuals playing volleyball. I thought for a second it was some kind of beach party, maybe I had arrived for “Transsexual theme night,” because there they were, playing volleyball, at least 3 of them were transsexual – one looked like RuPaul and had a wicked spike serve, from a distance he/she looked like a member of the Cuban volleyball team. “Hi, would you like to come and play volleyball with us?” he/she asked, eyelashes fluttering at me. “No thank you” I said. Actually I would have played under normal circumstances, but it was 6 PM and I had discovering to do. Besides which I would have felt a bit weird getting creamed playing volleyball by a couple of transsexuals, How do you explain that to your drinking buddies? I can just hear George's words now “WHAT? You lost to a girl with a COCK?!” Off the beach are many walking paths leading into the forest in the interior of the island. I followed one, passing some amazing limestone caves with stalactites hanging down, tree roots intertwined among the rock. Following the path led me to another beach, totally secluded, a large white beach surrounded by incredibly sheer, high cliffs. I walked the beach, and viewed an incredible sunset, the sun glowing orange in a blue/purple sky. The geography of Southern Thailand is a total orgasm for the eye. Words cannot describe it.

Walking back hurriedly in the near dark, I ran into Amanda and Cyril near the hotel. “Why don't you join us for a beer” they asked. We had a wonderful evening under the stars, starting with a few beers on the beach, ending up at Railey's fanciest restaurant where we managed to spend the equivalent of \$100 US. Thoroughly inebriated by the end of the night, I gave Amanda a few too many goodbye kisses, then staggered into my bungalow where I promptly dozed off to dreams of Amanda, bikinis, baby oil, and sexy British accents; “I like to be naughty, very, very naughty...”

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Bitchy bus lady

Back in Krabi, I arranged for what I thought would be the fastest way back to Phuket – by bus. The “bus” ended up being another shitty, sardine-like minibus, captained by a pushy, little bitch of a woman who asked to see my ticket a total of 3 times. After the second time I had shuffled the ticket away, not thinking I could possibly be asked a 3rd time... when the woman came I couldn't find it “Where is ticket? No ticket. No ticket, you go off bus.” I gave her my dirtiest “You are a worthless piece of shit” look and took my grand old time looking for my ticket while this woman was huffing and puffing away in impatience. Finding it, I held it up in my fingers as if I had won the lotto, giving her my second best “You are a worthless piece of shit” look. “Should I keep it?” I asked, “Are you going to come and ask me for it a 4th time?”

Krabi to Phuket by minibus takes a total of 3 hours which felt like about 10...the air-conditioning in these things never work, and the windows only open up a crack – I ended up falling into that spastic kind of sleep you lapse into when its too hot; head lolling, tongue sticking out, eyes opening up every once in a while to check out another minivan lying turned over in a ditch, head nodding forward, then sideways into the window, only waking up a few minutes later because your cheek is numb and sweaty and the window is all moist with a long drool running down its length..

English Class / thoughts on Thailand

My last evening in Thailand was spent with five Thai girls. I had been sitting on a beach chair, watching the sun setting over Patong beach, when a “Hello” suddenly came out of nowhere. I turned around to see a slightly chubby, cute girl, in her early 20's, a shy smile on her face. She was accompanied by a 2nd girl, this one slim and serious. “Can we talk to you?”

“Sure”

“We are learning English. We like to speak English with tourists so we can practice. Can we speak to you?”

Her name was Pooh, her friend's was Ping. They were from North-East Thailand, close to the Laotian border and were in Phuket studying English. I ended up inviting them and their three roommates for supper. Just to show you how cheap Thailand is; meals for 6 of us – including a couple of beers for me – came out to about \$15 US. “So expensive everything in Phuket” said one of the girls. “In North Thailand, not so expensive. Here too expensive for Thai.” They spoke of learning English, of getting good jobs in Bangkok. “To learn English very prestigious,” said one.

I had fallen in love with Thailand, although admittedly at a very artificial level; Phuket, Phi Phi, and Krabi were all designed for the tourist, they are not ‘Thai.’ I had barely touched the surface when it came to understanding Thai culture and the language factor meant that I had spoken to only a few locals during my week here. But Thailand left me with a curiosity to come back again; besides the incredible beauty and the great food, I felt a cultural depth here that I could not put my finger on. Thailand was different than anywhere I had ever been, totally foreign, exciting and exotic. I knew I would come back here again soon.

SINGAPORE

I left Thailand with a heavy heart. I was off to Singapore where I would meet up with George and spend my last few days before ending my trip. Flying into the tiny city-state, the plane glides over boat-filled waters – I read somewhere that Singapore has the most shipping traffic of any port in the world. In any case, it was impressive and it took about 10 minutes to clear the boats and descend over a very urban and flat landscape, to land a few minutes later at Changi International Airport.

I shared a taxi into the city with a Dutch man that I had befriended on the flight. I was impressed by the neat autobahn-like auto route, only the lush and beautiful landscaped flower gardens everywhere giving away that this was the tropics and not somewhere in Europe. Entering the city I saw modern buildings, a clean metropolis – can't say that anything really stuck out though, it seemed rather bland. I remarked to my Dutch friend – who lived in Singapore – that one of the guides had described Singapore as a soul-less, antiseptic city. “Hmm, well, there is nothing wrong with a clean, well-organized city. People always say bad things about Singapore.” He looked angered. Luckily for me we had arrived at the Singapore YMCA. I waved my goodbyes.

I spent the afternoon walking around the city's colonial district: Raffles Hotel, Raffles Statue, Raffles Landing Site – it was all pretty, clean, but quite ho-hum... Singapore is just featureless; unlike Hong Kong there is no geographical landmark that distinguishes this city. It also doesn't have the vibrancy of Hong Kong. Singapore did not turn me on.

I met up with George a bit later in the day at the Marriott Hotel. It was great seeing him again, he had been enjoying his time with his friends and looked very relaxed and happy. He had also gotten laid which had probably helped out. Actually he got laid twice, so he was almost glowing with happiness. We sat there, talking, in a beautiful open bar looking out over the shopping of Orchard Road. The number of big name stores here is truly amazing and shopping appears to be a sport. There were tons of people; well-dressed, good-looking people. And many beautiful, elegantly dressed Malay women. I have to admit that in this respect Singapore won hands down over Hong Kong, the women we saw here were just stupendous.

Singapore Zoo – beating off the animals

Ok, Singapore didn't turn me on and I wasn't up to walking around it's bland streets and avenues, so I decided to go to the zoo. The Singapore Zoo is world-renown, famous for its 'open concept' – all the barriers between the animals and the public have been constructed using naturally landscaped enclosures; moats, rock walls, vegetation. It is quite a large and impressive zoo and I saw elephants, tigers, orangutans, chimpanzees – basically any animal imaginable. I had read an interesting article on a Mr. Binatang bin Goncang who won a competition for 'Worst Job in Singapore.' His Job? He is a 'Zoo Sperm Bank Worker.' He has to go and wank off animals first thing in the morning; including orangutans, tigers, polar bears, rhinoceros, giraffes, and gorillas. "Each animal is different," he said. "The polar bears come rather quickly, because they're not used to my warm hands on their cold organs. The chimpanzees always want to be hugged afterwards. Hmm, maybe I'm weird, but it actually doesn't sound like such an awful job. And why do the animals have to be wanked every morning? Where do I sign up for that? Anyway, the Singapore Zoo was actually quite fantastic, a great way to spend a day in Singapore.

My last evening was spent drinking beer with George and his friends in a cool Irish pub. This was followed by supper at an outdoor restaurant, a lovely evening eating out, looking up at the stars and lights of Singapore's skyscrapers. I felt sad to be leaving the tropics, I had become accustomed to waking up to sunny skies, to walking around on warm evenings, a breeze off the ocean, the stars bright in the sky.

Coming back on the plane, I had one remaining postcard. I thought about my trip, and summarized it all very briefly on the back of the postcard;

"Saturday, Mar 24, 2001

On plane and thinking of what I've seen on this marvellous trip. Can't really say what was my favourite but think it may have been Southern Thailand. Hong Kong exciting, Malaysia great temples and super nice people, Singapore clean and organized (Could be any Western city). Best beaches and geography: Southern Thailand, gorgeous beaches, lush islands, incredible cliffs in Phi Phi and Krabi. Wish had spent more time here relaxing. Ultimate beach resort: Phuket. Hong Kong incredible geography and the Peak biggest single geographic highlight
Temples; Penang – Kek Lok Si temple. I found it amazing and beautiful
Sunsets: Penang had most beautiful and beaches were alive with people at sunset.
People: Malaysians in Penang were nicest, most honest people, could trust them with anything. Thais also nice, but tourism has affected them just a touch. Overall I found people friendly everywhere.
Food: Penang sticks out, also loved Thai food which was very spicy. Had good food everywhere though and great variety.

Hong Kong I very much enjoyed and would go back for few days. Southern Thailand a must and definitely want to go back and see more. Phi Phi and Railey Beach in Krabi recommended, a romantic paradise.
Loved my trip!!"

Thailand

“You are NOT taking my daughter to the Philippines!”

It had actually started out pretty well. I’d known Sylvie for a little over a month when I invited her to go to the Philippines with me. She was beautiful (looked like a young Catherine Deneuve), adventurous, plus it so happened that she had just finished a contract and was between jobs. “Perfect” I thought. I only started to get nervous when she mentioned having to tell her parents; she was 24, I was 35 – I don’t think they approved of me in the first place. It didn’t comfort me that Sylvie’s father is a big-shot criminal lawyer; he regularly appears on TV, usually defending sex clubs (the last time I had seen him he was defending a partner-swapping sex club) or high ranking members of Quebec biker gangs. I remember Sylvie telling me that her father had received a Harley Davidson as a gift, something about “getting Rocco off...” I had stopped her right there; “look, you might be my girlfriend, but I really don’t want to know about your dad’s sex life...” Ok, I’m just kidding.

Actually, it didn’t go as badly as I feared. I met her father, told him that we wanted to go to the Philippines together. It didn’t seem to be a big deal. He asked me if I would agree to a criminal background check. I accepted. Sylvie and I spent the next three weeks planning an extensive trip to the Philippines: Bohol, Palawan, the rice terraces in Northern Luzon, the beaches of Boracay...

All was going well until 3 days before our departure date. Her father found the Philippines on the map and heard about the Abu Sayev and its links with Osama Bin Laden and Al-Qaeda. I explained that the problem was only in the southernmost Sulu peninsula, but it was like explaining to a Filipino the relative danger of getting killed hitting a moose on one of Canada’s highways. Sylvie was reduced to tears by the pressure from her father and announced that she would have to back out of the trip. I was angry, then disappointed. She cried.

That’s the story how Sylvie and I ended up, on 3 days notice, going to Thailand instead of the Philippines.

LAX and planes – why I’m a loser

I have despised Los Angeles International Airport (LAX) ever since going through it last year. Americans do not glamorize air travel like the rest of the world – I find their airports congested, dirty and badly organized. American airports feel like bus stations. It always amazes me how in airports like Los Angeles friends and relatives can pass security and greet incoming passengers at the gate. This was our experience as we entered the gate, pushing our way into the main lobby through the hordes.

LAX is a horseshoe-shaped, hodge-podge of ratty looking terminals. On the plus side, you can easily exit the terminal buildings and walk outside in one of the most wonderful climates on earth. That’s what we did, hand in hand, 25C with a beautiful breeze off the ocean and the palms swaying in the wind. Sylvie and I were both feeling very happy and relaxed in the sunshine of

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Los Angeles and I was getting really turned on; LAX has great views of the tarmac. There were a string of 747s parked a few hundred meters away – Singapore Airlines, Lufthansa, Korean Airlines, and there, in the middle of the pack, a white and blue jumbo, the large pink flower on the tail identifying it as China Airlines. I was really excited – I had never flown China Airlines and I remember having marvelled at the beauty of her design while at Hong Kong's Chep Lap Kok airport the previous year.

Most people can't understand my fascination with planes. It's not the planes themselves, it's the exotic fantasies I get when I see different airlines: the British Airways colours for instance represents stately elegance and impeccable service. British Airways makes me think of the queen, not in a bad way mind you (like of seeing her spread-eagled or sitting on the toilet) but in a dignified, stately way, like when she primly waves to the crowd with her white gloved hand. KLM inspires the same emotions, it's colours are also classical, the light blue a little sexier than BA's – but then let's face it; the Dutch are way sexier than the British. British women don't take their tops off at the beach, the Dutch will. And even if they did, would you want to see a topless British woman? I think not. Then there's American Airlines; boring, ugly – why couldn't they have given it a paint job? Let's face it, most American airlines have lousy service, so not painting the plane is kind of like a warning (“...imagine what the food must be like – bet they have a conveyor belt from the bathroom right onto the food cart..”). Singapore is well represented by Singapore Airlines – beautiful, clean, immaculate. Thai's colours represent the beauty of Thailand. It's a sexy airline. South African Airlines likewise, you see that plane and you dream of the tropics. My all-time favourite airline is UTA, the French airline Air France later bought out. It has the stately blue and white colours of the French flag, with radically contrasting light green doors. UTA flew to all kinds of exotic destinations – I have flown it to Zambia; the huge 747 made several pit stops along the way in remote places like Libreville, Brazzaville, and Lusaka before going on to Lilongwe. That's a SEXY airline. Looking at it on the tarmac my mind conjures up images of French Polynesia, the deserts of Namibia, the jungles of West Africa.

Ok, ok, so maybe it was about time I had a girlfriend...

China Airlines – bad airline food & Sylvie

Boarding the large, gleaming China Airlines jumbo was a feeling I will never forget. The excitement and anticipation is one of the reasons why I love to travel so much – you never know what to expect, what could happen, what unexpected adventures lay ahead. We took off to incredible views of the beaches of Los Angeles and our first look at the ocean, the sun reflecting off the waters below.

Los Angeles to Taipei takes 11 hours and we watched three movies and ate lots of lousy plane food – I never thought I would ever say that, I usually love plane food. But China Airlines (which is from Taiwan, not China) had really bad food, starting with a weird cold soup which was either rice soup, tapioca soup, or the maggot leftovers from a recent Fear Factor episode. Thinking of it reminds me of every time I've ever puked in my life. I was suddenly glad we weren't going to have any meals in Taiwan. We ate, drank, watched movies and got to know each other. It was dark in the plane, most of our fellow passengers sleeping; Sylvie was talkative,

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her excitement infectious. She had barely travelled, the only place she had been was Jamaica. She spoke about art and design and paintings. She talked about her difficult childhood, tears suddenly in her eyes. I gave her a hug. We were very different Sylvie and I, she has a very emotional temperament, what I call an artistic temperament. I'm from German descent; we keep emotions in, even if it means painful facial cramps. It hit me that I barely knew Sylvie; here I was, on a plane, crossing the Pacific with someone I had met barely two months ago. Yes, you say 'How romantic' – it was very much so. But I also realized that I was responsible for her. And myself. Any fuck up and I would end up as crack filler on a Quebec highway.

Chiang Kai Shek Airport, Taiwan

This is not one of Asia's best airports. Old and spread out, it has the longest moving sidewalks I've ever seen. We arrived in the dark of the early evening and had a 3 hour wait for our connecting flight to Bangkok during which I desperately searched for a postcard from the Philippines (the Philippines are only about 500 kilometres south of Taiwan.) I could imagine Sylvie's father's face upon receiving a postcard from the Philippines; 'Greetings from the Philippines! Having a great time' it would say on the back (Ok, so I was still pissed off with her father). Sylvie didn't quite share my sense of humour. Sylvie has one of those smiles that makes your knees shake, her smile could win beauty contests. But when she's not happy she shuts down, clouds roll in, and you might as well get hit by lightning and die because there's a dark, heavy cloud over everything. Lesson one – her father was not to be the butt of my jokes. I spent about an hour trying to get out of the doghouse ("bet your dad has some interesting law stories huh?"... "bet he's got a lot of diplomas...") to no avail.

Bangkok – first impressions / Sukhumvit road

Most guidebooks on Thailand aren't too high on Bangkok. Lonely Planet: "Thailand's coronary-inducing capital has a surprising number of quiet escapes if you make your way out of the busy streets. But before you leave, you will have to put up with noise, pollution and some of the worst traffic jams in Asia. Add annual floods and sticky weather, and it's hardly surprising that many people develop an instant dislike for the place".

My first impression of Bangkok amounted to one word: concrete. Concrete buildings, concrete overpasses, concrete tunnels... no green anywhere. Unlike Hong Kong, there were no warm neon lights to greet our arrival – it was 1 am and the drive into the city was along a barren, potholed highway, the light from the street lamps white and stark, shadows falling uninvitingly on the tired low-level buildings lining the route.

2nd impressions weren't much better. We woke up early the next morning and decided to take a walk along touristy Sukhumvit road. This part of Bangkok is just chaos. Above the street runs the skytrain, a spanking modern rail line supported by huge concrete girders. Again the concrete everywhere. Sukhumvit road is a major commercial street as well as a major artery for traffic – the noise of cars hooting at each other is mind numbing, the exhaust from trucks, buses and cars

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a constant cloud. Bangkok has the air quality of a tire dump on fire, you can actually feel a film of filth settling on your body. Between the mass of vehicles people, tuk-tuks (golf cart-looking apparatus), and motorcycles move around, beeping and weaving. Beige-clad police officers direct traffic, masks covering their mouths and noses. Amongst all this are food stalls; vendors selling fruits, meats on skewers, and stir-fried noodles. I wondered how people could cook or eat food in this pollution. Actually, scratch that last line – anyone from the West shouldn't be that judgemental. We genetically modify vegetables and fruits (tomatoes should not naturally be the size of grapefruits), we stuff our farm animals with growth hormones then force-feed them parts of other dead animals, we take these vegetables/fruits/animals and slap on more chemicals just to improve their shelf lives. And that's the fresh stuff we get on our plates. Imagine the canned stuff which goes through more processing, or how about the frozen stuff which we stick in a microwave, heating them up with magnetron waves – how natural is that? So what's a little carbon? I bet you Thais will be laughing at us the day our ears start developing udders and producing milk.

Sylvie and I kept walking and walking, full of energy and quite happy to be discovering Bangkok – but the scenery never changed. I had hoped that we could walk all the way to Old Bangkok where the Grand Palace and the river are located but I slowly realized that our map was out of scale, there was no way we would get there on foot. It wasn't just the distance, it was the traffic – every intersection meant meandering between the cars, busses, trucks, and tuk-tuks that seemed to bully themselves forward, jamming up the street. Then there was the heat and exhaust which, combined with jet lag, started to make us light-headed (yes, I can hear you; “blah, blah, blah, whine, whine...”)

“Screw this” we said, deciding to take a tuk-tuk. Lonely Planet describes a tuk-tuk as a “Three-wheeled power saw gone berserk”; it looks like a golf cart decorated by a Latino – full of flashing lights and hanging decorations – and has amazing speed which it uses along with its small size to weave in and out of traffic. There's no better way of seeing Bangkok – we zipped through traffic, the engine buzzing, warm air blowing over us as we powered down a large boulevard. Just waiting at a light is interesting; next to us were a couple other tuk-tuks, between which motorcycles idled. It made me think of that Dr. Seuss book with all the bears on wheels; the one where they all crash and die at the end. Traffic in Bangkok is just nuts.

The “Official” Tourist Office

One of our missions that afternoon was to arrange for transport to the island of Ko Samet, supposedly a 4 hour bus ride south of Bangkok. We were taken by our tuk-tuk driver to a travel agency, which was described as an ‘Official Tourist Office.’ Arriving at the agency, we were helped out of the tuk-tuk by a couple of youths who, holding the door open for us, shepherded us into the office. The place was full of foreigners. We were given chairs to sit in and offered drinks. It seemed to me that they were very eager and friendly, maybe too much so I thought – anything ‘official’ in Canada usually means waiting in line for two hours before arriving at a counter where a fat, ugly, semi-bilingual person would look at his watch as you stepped up and spontaneously leave for a union-enforced cigarette break. This tourist office looked too good to be true.

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Our travel agent was a man with an ingratiating smile and manner. I smelled him a mile away.

“Ko Samet? Oh, vely nice. Have tours we sell you of Ko Samet!”

“No thank you. No tours. We just want to go there. Just transport”

“Oh, no tour...” looking disappointed. Looked around, consulted a list;

“\$75, we take you at hotel in minibus, go to Ban Phe, take boat to Ko Samet”

I’ve been on Thai minibuses. I hate them with a passion. I would rather have someone extract my tonsils with a Swiss army knife than take a Thai minibus...

“No. I don’t like minibuses. And \$75 too expensive”

“For you my friend, only \$50.”

Sylvie and I looked at each other and left. This was no ‘Official Tourist Office.’ Hey, I’ve been around, you got to wake up pretty early in the morning if you want to screw Mr. Frank Thomae!!

We took our tuk-tuk back through the now dark streets of Bangkok.

Evening on Sukhumvit road / Bangkok sex scene

Sukhumvit road is not as ugly at night – the harsh lines and greys of concrete are softened by multicoloured lights from stores, hotels, and vendor stands. The road and adjoining streets are suddenly alive with Thais and tourists – actually we noticed quite a lot of male Caucasians sitting in the open-air bars on some of the side streets, most notably on Nana soi, a small street with a cluster of bars. It didn’t seem the place to bring Sylvie – the bars were loud with male voices inebriated by beer and, no doubt, by the sexily dressed Thai girls that were visible even from the street. Bangkok is know for it’s raunchy nightlife and Nana soi is one of the hot spots; walking a bit further down the street we came across Nana Plaza, a 3-story complex of girlie bars lit up in neon; ‘Fantasia’, ‘G-spot’, ‘Erotica’, ‘Lollipop’, ‘Playskool’...girls stand outside the bars and try to lure in customers “Come handsome man, I make you happy. I love you long time...” Almost all the men were in their 40’s and 50’s and all seemed to have happy, glazed looks on their faces – and who can blame them? Fat, white, old and wrinkly at home, they come to Bangkok and have semi-clad Thai nymphettes clinging to them like seran wrap. I had seen the ‘information guides’ in the hotel room; entertainment in Bangkok seems to revolve around go-go bars (straight go-go bars, transsexual go-go bars, gay go-go bars, even “blowjob bars” where you can apparently drink a beer while getting serviced by a girl on her knees under the table), escort services (“get whipped!”, “3-somes right in your room!”, “Group discounts!!”) and massage parlours (oil massages, ‘body’ massages, ‘balls’ massages). But it’s one thing seeing these services on paper, it’s another seeing these establishments and their girls in real life. Its pretty pathetic, I thought, all the ingenious ways man has found to get off; you don’t see animals in the wild using whips, or sticking ping-pong balls and cigarettes in their vaginas or butts (regular shows in Bangkok go-go bars); you don’t see elephants servicing themselves orally – you know damn well that if man had trunks we would be sucking ourselves all day long. It’s amazing all the kooky fantasies and gadgets we’ve come up with to get ourselves off. Still, despite all this logic, I have to admit that I found myself trying to rationalize the need for a balls massage (“Sylvie, I think we should go get my balls massaged, they feel stressed. C’mon it would be fun...”)

We wandered back to Sukhumvit road. The avenue was alive with the same vendor stands and little makeshift stores that I had seen in Phuket, these markets just seem to sprout all over

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Thailand during the evening. Watches, CDs, movies, t-shirts, underwear, silks, mass-produced ‘Thai’ masks, bamboo leaf umbrellas, wooden sculptures from the north, luggage – you can buy almost anything you could imagine. Then there’s the little portable food stalls complete with a propane tank cooking up street food; chicken, beef, pork, shrimp, and fried noodles. Amongst the crowd were ordinary middle class Thais, tourists, touts, prostitutes, but also the occasional very poor Thai (in a few cases a woman with a sleeping baby) begging for food. Limbless beggars sat on the sidewalk sticking out scrawny arms.

Sylvie and I had some beer and then went back to the hotel where we took a hot shower to wash off the grime. We were pretty content to be sleeping the night in a luxury hotel after what we had seen in our first day in the city. Bangkok is definitely a test to Western sensibilities – for the first-timer, Bangkok is a complete shock to the senses.

Adventures and attractions in Old Bangkok

Our 2nd day in Bangkok was supposed to be a relaxing day spent visiting the tourist sites of Old Bangkok. It ended up much more than that.

Old Bangkok lies on the Chao Phraya River and is where most of the old temples are located. Within the old city lies the Grand Palace, the former residence of the Thai royal family and the domain of Wat Phra Kaew, the most important (and impressive) temple in Thailand (A “Wat” is a Buddhist temple). The area is full of wide boulevards bordered by trees, low rise buildings, gardens, and canals – parts of Old Bangkok actually remind me of Les Champs D’Ellyses in Paris. The only downside to the area are the multitudes of camera-totting tourists pouring out of huge, air-conditioned tour buses.

Our first stop was Wat Pho which is listed in Lonely Planet as a ‘must see.’ It’s the largest Wat in Bangkok (20 acres) and also the home of the huge 46 meter long ‘Reclining Buddha’ – along with more than 1000 other Buddha images, rock warriors, chapels, temples, spires, rock gardens, belltowers, and Thai girls in miniskirts. Ok, I’m lying about the last part. Wat Pho is also known as a great place to get a traditional Thai massage – Sylvie suggested we get a massage but I noticed that the ‘masseuses’ were monks and that all were male. I might be open-minded, but there’s no way I was going to let a guy touch my penis. Anyway, Wat Pho is a beautiful, peaceful site and is very popular with tourists; half the fun here is people watching. I kind of chuckled to myself watching a couple of guys being talked into a massage by their wives – they obviously didn’t know what I knew.

We walked out of Wat Pho and headed towards the Grand Palace, meeting a man on the corner who told us that the Grand Palace was closed for lunch. Nice guy, I spoke to him for a few minutes, like 99% of Thais he was very friendly. He beckoned over a tuk-tuk driver; “You should go on a tour and come back in an hour when the Grand Palace is open, my friend will give you a tour for 50 baht.” He suggested the Standing Buddha temple, the Lucky Buddha temple, and a visit to the Export Center where they were having a “One week promotion on Thai gems.” Sylvie and I said okay, we’d see the temples, but would skip the Export Center.

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Driving around Old Bangkok by tuk-tuk is a great way to see the quiet parks, temples, and lazy life outside the main tourist spots. The small streets are devoid of traffic and flanked by large, leafy trees. Birds chirped and I spotted a peacock picking at some seeds in the gardens of a small temple. We stopped at a wat – the Standing Buddha temple (there’s a standing Buddha and a sign indicating that this is “The Standing Buddha Temple” so I knew we weren’t lost) – then got back into the Tuk-Tuk and headed for the next destination on our tour.

The Lucky Buddha temple was another very quiet temple, empty except for two men, one a Caucasian, who got out of a taxi at the same time we pulled up. We took off our shoes and went inside. The temple was actually quite small and a bit disappointing and we ended up talking to the other tourist, a friendly American guy who had just arrived from San Francisco. He was travelling around with a Thai “friend” (I suspected they were gay.) We started discussing travel plans and comparing itineraries. He asked where we were visiting while in Bangkok and we explained we were taking this little private tour before going back to the Grand Palace. I mentioned that our friendly Thai at Wat Pho had suggested the Export Center – did he know anything about it? “The Export Center, of course I know about it – I come here every year and buy gems there and resell them in the States.” With that he pulled out a receipt and a small package – the receipt was for the equivalent of about US\$3,000. Damn expensive I thought. “The Export Center has a sale one week of every year where they waive all export duties. It’s a special promotion by the Thai government meant to encourage tourism – you should go and have a look.” He opened up the package and showed us his gems. “Blue Sapphires, very popular in the US, I can resell them at twice the price when I get back.”

I continued talking to the American while Sylvie did the thing to do at the Lucky Buddha temple; she knelt in front of the bronze Buddha and held in her hand what can best be described as a circular cylinder with lots of little sticks in it. She shook the cylinder until one of the sticks fell out – the Thai friend of the American explained “This special. You pray, Lucky Buddha make happen. Look at paper” Sylvie excitedly unwrapped the paper from the stick and read the message. The fortune was quite cryptic; “Not as expected. Activities turning out to be unsuccessful. Keep cool. Be careful. The bone you pick with others will only be your own. Patient recovering. Legal case defensible. Outstanding debts not likely to be refunded. Company not available. Good luck approaching”. Sylvie didn’t look so excited anymore and spent the next 10 minutes analyzing the Lucky Buddha fortune. It wasn’t the typical, happy fortune you usually get out of a fortune cookie; “Your faith in other’s goodness will be generously rewarded” or “Your ability to juggle many tasks will take you far” come to mind. Anyway, I don’t believe in that stuff, but I could see that the fortune had bothered Sylvie.

The tuk-tuk driver: “Now go Export Center.” I had to admit I was curious after having spoken to the American, selling sapphires at double the price would cover this vacation. “Ok, let’s go to the Export Center.”

The Export Center was a jewellery store. Large, it was very popular with tourists – the place was packed. It didn’t take long to get help though; the manager came over, sat down, and explained about the Thai government sale, the waiver of duties, asked if we were looking for jewellery for ourselves or if it was for resale, what kind of jewellery we wanted, etc. The story was the exact same as given by our American friend. Sylvie and I looked at each other and decided to go for it.

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We paid \$3,000 US for a set of Blue Sapphire jewellery inlaid in 18 carat gold. The manager gave us a certificate, and, upon our insistence, arranged to have the sapphires sent to Montreal by courier. The paperwork done, the manager shook our hands “I have associate who will take you around Bangkok, give you good time. Pim will give you tour, arrange massage, take you to eat. Whatever you like. Compliments of Thai Government.”

Pim was a smiling but rather unattractive girl. She seemed eager to practice her English though, always asking “You understand what I say?” She thought a massage would be good for us and, after the excitement of our purchase, we agreed. We were taken to a very large massage parlour. There were no tourists in sight, and judging by the smiles and looks, it was obvious that we were far off the beaten tourist trail. It didn’t take long to be taken into a dorm sized private room with 3 flat beds on the floor. We insisted that Pim also take a massage and we were soon all wearing funny striped pyjamas and lying on the floor. Three smiling, laughing middle aged Thai women entered the room and introduced themselves. Minutes later my feet were getting oiled and rubbed, my masseuse laughing at the cracking noise my toes made when she pulled them. She started bending my legs in positions they had never been, pulling my knees onto my chest and sitting on my legs until I thought my knees would pop up through my head. She dug her fingers into my thighs, her fingers like the back end of a hammer pulling out my muscles. She straddled me and rubbed, snapped my arms back and forth, squeezed me some more, then dug her fingers into more joints and laughed some more while I screamed. After about 15 minutes I realized that I was in a state of relaxation that I’d never experienced before. I had also learned that a real Thai massage does not involved baby oil or the manipulation of my penis (I think that’s one of those misconceptions we have in the West.) We ended up getting a 2-hour massage, total cost \$6 US per person (we only paid for Pim, the Thai government was footing the bill for Sylvie and I.)

We flopped out of the massage parlour, almost hanging to each other for support, and were taken for lunch at a nice restaurant on the banks of the Chao Phraya river. The Chao Phraya is not beautiful, the water is brownish and not very appealing. But it is peaceful and relaxing, the occasional barge, ferry, or colourful tour boat breaking the silence, a light breeze off the water keeping us cool and fresh.

Next was a Bangkok canal tour. We boarded a long-tailed boat at the quay about 50 feet from the restaurant, a boat piloted by two elderly gentlemen. Soon we were out bouncing on the waves of the Chao Phraya with great views over the river and the Grand Palace on the far bank, the sun reflecting off the golden spires of Wat Phra Kaew. The boat turned off into a canal and within minutes we were in an environment we would have never imagined would exist so close to the city center. Off to the sides were people’s homes, schools, monasteries, even areas of open grassland where you could imagine yourself in the middle of rice fields far from any city. We saw brown children in underwear jumping in the water at what appeared to be a school, smiling and waving excitedly at us as we passed by. The wooden houses along the water all had porches overflowing with plants and vegetables. From the porches, stairs led down to the water where a small wooden boat would often be attached. Dogs lay in the shade under high fronds, women worked in little gardens. Bangkok’s canals (or Klongs as they are called) used to be the main mode of transport a hundred years ago when many of the city’s residents lived along the river and the network of canals that feed the river; the city was actually dubbed the “Venice of the East.” It is still the fastest way to get around most of the city. The problem with the canals today is pollution – almost half of Bangkok’s sewage is untreated and goes directly into the canals or

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the river (which explains the Chao Phraya's colour – nope, that coffee colour is not wholesome sediment from far away mountains..) Serious infections from the water are common, sometimes resulting in death. The most famous story is that of 21-year old Apichet Kittikorncharoen, the lead singer of the successful Thai rock group "D2B". In 2003 he crashed his car into a canal, was pulled out and given CPR. Doctors thought he would make a quick recovery. But fungi had entered his lungs during the dunk in the canal – 2 weeks later he had a massive brain hemorrhage. After 4 brain operations, Big (as he is known) is still recovering. Remember that when you consider taking a dip.

It was 5 PM and we were all a little tired. We drove back to where Pim lived and dropped her off, letting her get changed (she had arranged for a show for that night) while Sylvie and I went to get a coffee. We actually ended up in a McDonald's, a pretty pathetic place for a coffee I know, but Bangkok doesn't seem to have many cafes... Anyway, McDonalds IS fun for one thing; asking for stuff they don't have. Try this; go to McDonalds, get in line. When you finally get to the counter, pretend to search the menu in desperation, then blurt out something like this: "do you have donuts?" When they say "no", take your time searching the menu again "do you have fried chicken? How about Beaver Tails? Do you have spaghetti with garlic bread?" When they say "no" get angry, raise your voice ("THIS PLACE SUCKS!! I HATE MCDONALD'S!") usually works) and walk out.

We had just left McDonalds and were walking down the sidewalk of a large, semi-lit, boulevard when suddenly we both sensed something huge behind us. Jumping in shock and turning around, we were face to face with an elephant! An elephant in the middle of the city of Bangkok! "You like give elephant banana?" asked the owner of the elephant. We were too shocked to react, but a Thai lady walking by gave the man a few bahts for the bananas and proceeded to feed them to the elephant. We watched the elephant continue along the sidewalk and off into the dark with his owner. I've read somewhere that elephants in Bangkok are supposed to wear reflectors but I didn't see any on this one.

We met up with Pim and had a nice supper while watching rather boring but very colourful traditional Thai dance. We told Pim how grateful we were for her company that day; it had been an incredible day and we had seen and done things that the average tourist would rarely ever experience. We exchanged email addresses and told her that we hoped to hear from her again. Bangkok was everything that the guide books say; dirty, polluted, noisy – I wouldn't like to live here – but at the same time we experienced those 'Quiet escapes' off the tourist trail that Lonely Planet mentioned. Sylvie and I had an absolutely great time in Bangkok! Thais are so nice! And the Thai government certainly treats its tourists well.

Sequel to our Bangkok adventure: We had fallen for the famous Thai gem scam. I am an expert on it now. We received the gems by courier in Montreal as promised. The problem came when we tried to resell them. Jewellers look at us like we were a couple of idiots when we told them how much we had paid for them. I ended up having the jewellery appraised by a gemologist – they were valued at half the purchase price. I met another couple through the gemologist who had been fooled in exactly the same manner only a few days earlier by the same American guy and his friend! It was all very well planned and many tourists are suckered into the gem scam.

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I attempted to get a refund but this is a very difficult process if you've already left the country. I put a lot of pressure on the Thai tourist police (totally useless), the Thai Gem & Jewellers association (never heard a word) and The Thai Consulate in Ottawa (never heard a word.) The best bet is the Thai department of Internal Affairs who can 'negotiate' with the jeweller for a refund. The Canadian Consulate in Bangkok was also quite helpful. These stores however operate under a given name for a very short time – 2 weeks after our return (6 weeks after our purchase) we found out that 'Thai Mining Ltd', otherwise known as 'Export Center' closed its doors. Needless to say we never heard from Pim.

The only thing we could do was accept the fact that we had been screwed with a smile on our faces, that we are safe and sound and that this was an expensive lesson. Lonely Planet (and every other guidebook) mentions the Thai Gem scam, anyone who had more than 3 days to prepare for Thailand would have probably seen the warning.

The Lucky Buddha temple was not lucky for us. Sylvie's fortune was eerie in hindsight and should have served as a warning!

What to see in Bangkok: Wat Pho, the Grand Palace, and Wat Traimit in Old Bangkok are musts according to Lonely Planet. They also suggest the Wat Sai floating market in Thonburi, Jim Thompson's House (Traditional Thai art and architecture) as well as a canal tour (Which I would recommend). This can all be done in the 2-3 days deemed sufficient in Bangkok by most guidebooks.

Useful web site: www.2bangkok.com for anything you need to know about Bangkok including the gem scam and a Sky-train route map.

Getting to Ko Samet / Thais & Mai pen rai

“Ko” means “Island”.

Getting to Ko Samet: Public buses leave from the Northern Bus Station in Bangkok. Best way there is to take the sky-train, which is ultra modern and rapid, to the last stop on the line which is Mochit station. From there its a blocks walk to the Northern Bus Station. We bought ourselves tickets to Ban Phe which is the coastal town from where you take the boat to Ko Samet. The cost? 125 bahts, or approximately \$3 US for a very clean, air-conditioned bus with a washroom in the back.

Sylvie and I woke up to a cloudy, rainy day – nonetheless we were quite excited to be heading for the beaches of Ko Samet. We packed up and took the skytrain to the Northern Bus Station. We met some very nice, helpful Thais that morning. The attendant at the skytrain station was all smiles and showed us how the ticketing system worked. At the bus station we purchased tickets from a sweet-faced lady in a booth, then went for an early lunch in a little hole-in-the wall restaurant. We pointed at food to order. Again, nothing but smiles and friendliness. Strolling back towards the bus station, we saw a lady running up to us, talking quickly in Thai. It was the lady from the booth trying to tell us that the bus was leaving. We thanked her and ran for the bus, getting there in the nick of time.

Thailand is quite touristy and I’ve found in my two trips that some of the operators in the tourist industry are dodgy, they’ll tell you that you should book ahead with them because “too many tourists”, or will offer over-priced “bargains.” The \$75 (per person) minibus to Ko Samet offered by the ‘Official Tourist Office’ was a perfect example. There are a lot of tourist scams in Thailand. But the ordinary Thai is very honest and hospitable. There’s a very popular saying in Thailand which basically sums up the Thai character “Mai pen rai”, which basically means “No problem”/“Never mind”/“It’s cool”/“Don’t worry, be happy.” I’ve read about many ex-patriots living in Thailand getting frustrated by the Thais and their easy, unhurried way of doing things. But it also explains the smiling faces and the genuine openness and friendliness of the people. When you get away from mass tourism you meet some incredibly nice people who will move your heart through small but very touching gestures.

Ko Samet – constipation & underwater sex

The bus ride took 3 hours and brought us to Ban Phe, a small town on the coast with a bus station and a large market right next to a pier. From there we took a small, wooden ferry across to the island, white beaches and palm trees beckoning to us over dark blue sea.

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There are no large hotels on Ko Samet, accommodation is in the form of bungalows – most quite simple – lining the shore. We chose to stay at Saikaew Villa which was on the higher end of the price range, it came out to about \$23 US per night for a very large, clean bungalow with a private bathroom. Actually Sylvie surprised me by suggesting we stay at the cheapest place on the beach, a spot with old, rustic bungalows replete with slats of wood across the floor and no bathroom. I thought it was cool that she suggested it and I was pleasantly surprised – I once travelled with another woman who had driven me crazy with her prissyness. Sylvie was impressing me. But I was on vacation, not on ‘Survivor’ – besides which, communal bathrooms make me constipated. I remember being sent to camp for a week when I was 12 years old – by day 4 my stomach started to burble and hurt, by day 6 it had turned to cement and my farts had kept everyone in the dorm awake. By day 7 a bad smell seeped from my pores and a guy with a shovel and bucket came for me. The first thing I had done getting home was jam up the toilet. Nope, I think I prefer a nice place with a private bathroom.

The beaches of Ko Samet are great – wide, beautiful beaches of pure white sand. It was still cloudy, but Sylvie and I walked the long beaches, climbed up large rocks, and jumped around in the warm water. The island had tourists, but was not overflowing with foreigners like some of the other islands we would see later. It also attracted quite a lot of Thais because of its proximity to Bangkok. You can always spot a Thai on the beach because they go into the water naked. I’m joking; Thais are quite modest and go in the water fully clothed in sports shorts and t-shirts.

Evenings on the island are fantastic; restaurants and bars put their tables out on the beach when the sun goes down, candles on every table. For the first time in Thailand we had a chance to wind down and relax, the waves lapping the beach a few feet away.

Sylvie and I stayed on Ko Samet for 3 wonderful, romantic days. We discovered the island, hiking and climbing the many hidden coves and secluded beaches. The island is a national park and construction has been limited, many parts of it are still quite wild. The hottest parts of the day were spent at the beach, getting massages (200 baht an hour, about \$ 4 US, from friendly Thai ladies) or in the water conducting various scientific tests on the effects of buoyancy and water pressure on the lower extremities. Sylvie and I concluded that the buoyancy of salt water was a good thing, and that water pressure did not in fact lead to the painful seizure of the testing apparatus (which was also a good thing, because I had visions of having to carry Sylvie straddled around my waist to the clinic). Like everyone else we walked the long beaches at sunset – it was beautiful and alive; tourists walking hand in hand, children and dogs running and chasing each other, some people playing soccer. The sun would slowly descend over the South China Sea casting brilliant, peaceful reflections on the water and the beach.

It was almost perfect. Sylvie and I got along great except for maybe a few incidents; like when I tried to take a picture of her. She got really upset and one of her dark moods came over her. She could go from a happy mood to a miserable one at a moments notice. It was like flipping a light switch. But that was rare on Ko Samet. Our time on the island went by too quickly – we could easily have stayed much longer if there wasn’t so much else to see in Thailand.

Travelling to Chiang Mai / Neva

Ko Samet had been great for relaxing and getting over the jetlag – we were now ready for adventure! Northern Thailand is known for temples, hill tribes, and trekking in the mountains – it sounded good to us, so we booked ourselves a flight from Bangkok to Chiang Mai, the gateway to Northern Thailand.

We had a travel day. We took the boat/bus combination back to Bangkok where we took the taxi to the airport. Bangkok airport is not very attractive or very interesting for the plane enthusiast . Only when you reach the departure gates do they have windows looking out over the tarmac. The highlight was looking straight down a lineup of about eight parked Thai Airways 747s. I also saw a bunch of airlines I'd only previously seen in pictures; a Saudi Arabian Airlines jumbo, an Air India 747. I also saw a couple of Eva Air jets. Always brings a lump to my throat when I see Eva Air. Add an "N" to the beginning of Eva and you get the name of the first girl I was ever deeply, hopelessly, unquestionably in love with. Actually they had a restaurant in Montreal called the Neva Grill which I wanted to burn down every time I passed it because it reminded me of her. Seeing the name all the time tortured me. I remember one day, feeling depressed and hostile, when I spat a huge gob on one of the windows of the chic restaurant... made me feel good. I still remember the way people looked at me, like I was a weirdo or something. Anyway, I'm straying and dwelling on the past. I was here with Sylvie and I quickly forgot about Eva Air when we boarded the Thai Boeing 777 – I had never flown a 777 and was surprised that they would use such a large aircraft for such a short flight. The flight to Chiang Mai was supposedly an hour, but we circled the airport for an additional 20 minutes due to 'traffic.' When we landed there was no other plane in sight.

Domestic Air Travel – very easy to book and quite inexpensive. For example, Bangkok-Chiang Mai return ticket was approximately US\$90 on Thai, and we booked it at a small travel agency on Ko Samet 2 days prior to our flight. Booked all air trips in a similar fashion in Thailand and we never had any problems.

Hotel booking in airport – Most Thai airports have a tourist bureau where you can look at the pictures and prices of the various hotels. Once chosen they will reserve for you – in my experience you get a better price than if you just walked into the hotel from the street.

First impressions of Chiang Mai

At the airport we booked a hotel room; centrally located, clean, a place with an imaginative name; 'People Place.' Actually a descriptive name is a good thing because we had a couple of other slightly cheaper options; the 'Roach Place' (sounded rustic and unpretentious), the 'Bedbug Place' (kind of sexy and cute.) We ended up splurging for the 'People Place' (US\$15 per night) – it wasn't exactly the Ritz but the room was comfortable and it had a big colour TV. The only thing missing was a swimming pool which we were to regret later.

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We checked into the hotel and changed. It was quite late by the time we set foot on the streets of Chiang Mai. First impressions – the temperature was cooler than Bangkok, it was also more touristy. There's a lot of 'hippie' tourists in Chiang Mai, the same nirvana-seeking bunch you see in Kathmandu. The city has many temples; one on almost every street. Besides that there's shopping – tons of kiosks – Chiang Mai is famous as being THE place to shop in Thailand. We also noticed differently dressed women in the markets; clothed in colourful robes and headgear, often adorned with silver coins or beads. These women are from some of the different ethnic hill tribes that have migrated to Northern Thailand over the last few hundred years from China, Burma, Laos and Vietnam.

We were starving and went into a small restaurant where we had an incredibly delicious meal. One thing we quickly noticed was that food in Chiang Mai was fantastic, it seemed and looked the same as in Bangkok (which was in itself great) but it just tasted somehow better. We burped and farted our way back to the hotel and collapsed like beached whales upon the bed.

Chiang Mai is one of the “Oldest continually inhabited settlements in Thailand” (LP). Whereas Bangkok is only 200 years old, Chiang Mai has a history dating back to the late 13th century and enjoyed its golden age in the 15th century when it was the capital in the Kingdom of Lanna which controlled most of what now constitutes northern Thailand, north-western Laos, the eastern Shan states of Burma and parts of Yunnan province in southern China.

Wat Phra Doi Suthep / around Chiang Mai / mood swings

We had big plans for the following day. We started off taking the taxi to the 600 year old Wat Phra Doi Suthep which is on a mountain 16 km from Chiang Mai. The drive actually seems much longer because of the winding road through the mountains. I noticed that the air in the Chiang Mai area was either foggy or smoggy; there was a constant haze. My suspicion was that it was caused by fires in the region. Arriving at the grounds of the temple, Sylvie and I walked up 300 stairs to get up to the Wat, spotting a few monks in orange robes on the way. Wat Phra Doi Suthep is Chiang Mai's most famous temple for good reason, it is beautiful and the setting is magnificent – on a clear day there are sweeping views of Chiang Mai from the mountain (this was not one of those days however.)

The Wat itself is copper plated and looks like pure gold. It has emerald Buddhas, gold bells and gongs, painted murals of large elephants, golden statues of snakes and lions inlaid with multicoloured stones... from an artistic viewpoint alone the temple is very impressive. The gardens around the Wat are beautiful with pink bougainvilleas and some wild and wonderful vegetation and trees including Jackfruit trees (which hold huge 30 to 40 pound fruits). I was really impressed by everything and quite happy to be there – when suddenly I looked at Sylvie and I saw that her mood had changed, the smile had left and her face was sullen, angry even. “What's the matter?” I asked.

Sylvie was on the point of tears; “I don't understand anything”.

“What do you mean?”

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“I don’t understand anything. Buddhism, these Wats, why it’s in gold, what all these trinkets, statues, and elephants mean. I don’t understand anything...” she looked really pissed off and walked away from me.

Well, I didn’t understand the significance of all these things either. I know the basic concepts of Buddhism, no more, but I don’t throw a shit-fit about it. I left Sylvie alone to brood and walked around the huge Wat by myself, I don’t like bad vibes and strong emotions (unless it’s in the throes of passion, Woo Hoo!) Why was she pissed off at me? We were on holiday, seeing things and supposedly having a good time. I didn’t kill her cat or puke on her carpet. I didn’t ask her to pose in a schoolgirl’s uniform or service me orally while balancing a bottle of beer on her head. No, I was a nice guy; I had paid for her trip and was trying to be an enthusiastic travel partner. She was the most erratically moody person I have ever met; the only way to deal with her moods seemed to be to wait them out. It crossed my mind that maybe she had a chemical imbalance. Anyway, Wat Phra Doi Suthep was my sightseeing highlight during our short stay in Chiang Mai.

We took the taxi back to Chiang Mai in silence. Sylvie took a piece of paper, wrote something and gave it to me. It was a nice little love note, apologizing for her ‘moods’ and promising she would be more careful. I gave her a kiss and Sylvie’s radiant smile came back. I told myself I would do whatever she wanted the rest of the day, whatever made her happy. I wanted her in a good mood. That’s how we ended up going shopping. Shopping is what everyone does in Chiang Mai and we spent the next few hours visiting factories: an umbrella factory, a silk factory, a silver factory. We learned how paper umbrellas were made, how silk was grown and harvested, how silver was moulded into jewellery. It was pretty goddamn boring and I suddenly felt myself feeling sorry for those married men that I sometimes see getting bossed around by their women, the ones following their fat wives around shopping centers saying stuff like “you look beautiful my dear” in that defeated, dejected voice. I could suddenly empathize with them.

We went to see a few of Chiang Mai’s temples in the afternoon and our butts started to drag. We were Buddha-ed out and went off in search of a swimming pool. We had an interesting experience when we encountered a group of young Thai men on the street “Hello, where are you from?” one of them asked. “Montreal, Canada” I replied. After a few niceties they asked where we were going “Too hot, we go to a swimming pool” to which one of them, with a mischievous smile on his face, replied “Yes, your girlfriend go for exercise, she has big bum!” This was followed by all of us (except Sylvie) laughing our guts out. Ok, I felt better.

We had seen a lot of Chiang Mai that day, but honestly neither of us was very taken by the city. After having read up, I had expected it to be smaller with great views of surrounding mountains. No. Chiang Mai is not a town but a small-sized city: lots of cement and bricks. We couldn’t see any mountains, in fact we couldn’t see the horizon because it was hazy in the two days we were there. We wanted nature. And I hoped to change the mood with another destination. So we went to a travel agency and ended up booking a flight for the following day to Mae Hong Son, a small town close to the Thai-Burmese border. It sounded more like what we were looking for.

Lonely Planet hotel recommendations – While walking in Chiang Mai we saw a hotel recommended by Lonely Planet, and it was pretty cruddy. Lonely Planet is by far the best travel guide, but in my experience accommodations listed usually cater to the low end crowd – beware if you want more than just basic accommodation!

What to see in Chiang Mai: (according to Lonely Planet): Wat Phra Doi Suthep, Wat Chiang Man, Wiang Kum Kam, Tribal Museum, the Night Bazaar (ie. The market that seems to overtake Chiang Mai at night...)

Mae Hong Son & Quebecers

We fell in love with Mae Hong Son the second we saw the small town from the plane. The flight takes 30 minutes from Chiang Mai and goes over green mountains and streams before descending to the small village of Mae Hong Son. Landing, we walked out onto the tarmac, smelled the fresh air and had a look around us – we were in a small valley, large mountains surrounding us in all directions. The sky was a clear blue, the air fresh and clean. It was absolutely beautiful, almost Swiss-like.

We booked into a really nice hotel, ‘Rooks Holiday Hotel and Resort’ which, at about \$45 US, was the most expensive place in town. Hot and sweaty, we decided to take a dip in the gorgeous hotel pool. Sylvie and I were enjoying the peace and quiet when a bus load’s worth of middle aged people suddenly invaded the pool. One minute we had the whole pool to ourselves, the next we had old people with bad swimsuits and obvious hearing problems creating riptides in the pool. And the language they spoke. I couldn’t believe it. Quebecers. How scary is that? Sylvie and I stopped talking (which didn’t take much of an effort, there was still some friction in the air), afraid we’d get dragged into a conversation about where we lived, worked, or worse, the weather in Montreal. It made me reflect on what a small world it is. I remember being 17 years old and going with my mom to Morocco – we had boarded a plane in Montreal, a Royal Air Maroc 747, and had ended up sitting one row in front of people from my hometown of Ste. Marie de Beauce (population 10,000 at the time). What are the odds of that?

Mae Hong Son has become touristy. Walking around we saw a few internet cafes and about a dozen bars and restaurants. At the same time, it still has the charm and feel of being a northern trading town – it didn’t feel touristy to me. It has a good-sized and busy market that brings tribes people in to sell their produce, they were dressed unlike anything we’d previously encountered on the trip; women wearing dark shawls and long, heavy skirts, the men with thick sweaters. They looked like mountain people, a bit rough around the edges; dark from working under the sun, their teeth sometimes crooked and dark. We felt curious stares looking at us as we walked around the market, eyes especially on Catherine and her beautiful blonde locks.

Mae Hong Son also has nice, quiet temples. The most scenic is Wat Phrathat Doi Kong (trying saying that 3 times!) Getting there meant taking a 15 minute Tuk-Tuk ride up a steep mountain, the road full of sharp twists and turns. The views from the Wat are incredible; mountains as far as the eye could see, mist lying among far-away valleys. Directly below is Mae Hong Son,

temples and a lake discernible among large, leafy trees. There was a small fire at the edge of town, smoke drifted lazily into the sky. Wat Phrathat Doi Kong Mu itself is quite small but looks Indian, two white and gold spires (clearly visible from anywhere in town) dominating the view.

History of Mae Hong Son – dates back to the nineteenth century, when the town was founded as a training camp for elephants. The royal family of Chiang Mai hired the Shan people to capture wild elephants and train them in the area. The camp grew around the lake (Jonglang Lake), which was the elephants bathing spot. The people were kept busy here with the elephant trade which boomed and flourished along with the logging trade in the late 19th century and early 20th century. When the logging trade declined, Mae Hong Son then became a sleepy “backwater” town. It was often used as a place to transfer out of favour government officials, as it was so far from any other town. Mae Hong Son wasn’t connected by any paved roads until the late 1960’s, effectively cutting it off in the rainy season.

In the last couple of decades, Mae Hong Son has become a popular tourist destination, due to the magnificent scenery and peaceful atmosphere.

Hiking around Mae Hong Son

We walked into the most bizarre looking travel agency in Mae Hong Son that evening, a small office across from the Baiyoke Chalet Hotel. Posted on the walls were postcards from all over the world, pictures of Mae Hong Son sights, and in big letters quotes such as “Our guide has corniest jokes in Mae Hong Son”, “A hike a day will keep the doctor away”, “You like to hike alright”. Despite these we walked in; “Hi, we are interested in a 1 day hiking tour tomorrow, would you have anything?” The owner was an older man in his 50’s, in good shape, but with a weathered face, wearing a safari hat “Where are you from?”

“Canada” I replied.

“Ah Canada” said the man, slowly going through his desk, filing through a bunch of postcards, and finally coming up with one “Do you know Mike Smith from Toronto? He write postcard,” he started reading “Hello Po, thank you again for the wonderful 3 day trek. It was the highlight of our vacation in Thailand.”

“No, I don’t know him. Toronto’s a very big city. We are from Montreal.”

“Ah Montreal” he said still filing through his postcards, “Here is another one from Canada. From Vancouver...” With that he starts reading us the postcard he received from the person in Vancouver.

“That’s very nice. Your tours must be good. Do you have anything for tomorrow?”

“You stay 3 days, take you on tour in mountains. Visit Hill tribes and sleep in Hill Tribe villages.”

“No, No. We have to go back to Chiang Mai after tomorrow – we just have tomorrow. Do you have a tour tomorrow?”

The man slowly got up, almost grudgingly, consulted a list, made a phone call. “Tomorrow morning, have to be here at 7 am, wear good shoes and bring water. Make sure you here at 7!!.”

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Sylvie and I were all excited when we arrived at the travel agency. We met the three people we would be spending the rest of the day with; Dom, the Thai guide, was a good looking, sturdy man in his late 30s/early 40's, his hair pulled back into a knot. His English was good, his frequent jokes interrupted by his own loud laughs. Married with 4 kids, he spoke 26 different tribal languages/dialects. He told us that he regularly gave these tours but always varied the course so he wouldn't pass by the same village more than once a month. Also there were two slightly hung over but friendly German men who I like to call Hans and Franz. Hans looked typically German – big and broad shouldered, athletic-looking. With hiking books and a bandanna tied over his head, he looked like a mercenary looking to kick Thai butt. His friend Franz was his opposite; smaller, slighter, he didn't look at all athletic. Franz wore a loose orange t-shirt over what appeared to be swimming shorts. He was recovering badly from the previous night, sweating in the cold morning air.

It was 7:10am when we all jumped in the back of Dom's pickup truck. "Put on blanket" said Dom, giving us some army blankets, "is cold". He wasn't kidding. Within minutes we were out of town and driving through the mountains, our lips blue and our teeth rattling. We looked like a bunch of tourists being sent to boot camp. All of a sudden the pickup stops; Dom comes to the back "Okay, first lesson, what is this?" as he picks up a big leaf. We all shrug. "Banana leaf! What do we do with banana leaf?" Again nobody has an answer. "ROOFS! In Thailand we make roof with banana leaf." Dom got back in the pickup and kept on driving through the mountains while we went back to freezing.

The view became increasingly beautiful as the pickup climbed higher and higher. We reached the summit, the road winding along the top of the mountain, the views stupendous. We came into a village, slowly passing a rudimentary one story schoolhouse. We were in a Black Hmong village. The Black Hmong originally came to this part of Thailand from China (they look more Chinese than Thai) and their villages are traditionally at very high altitudes. What struck me were the number of children – the road was filled with kids on their way to school, maybe 75 of them, children ranging anywhere from 6 to 16, carrying their books and chatting, staring and waving excitedly at the pickup as we got closer. We drove about 100 feet further. Dom had just parked the car when a couple of little boys came running. They were about 4 years old, their little faces excited but shy, they stopped short and only came forward when Dom called to them, beckoning them over. Dom had brought pastries, which he handed to us and which we distributed to the kids. About 10 more pre-school kids came running, greeting us with shy smiles.

The village was primitive, the wooden houses had dirt floors and metal roofs and all seemed to have a garden outside and a few goats that dallied around. Smiling Villagers quietly greeted Dom as he showed us around.

Using the Black Hmong village as our starting point, we started our trek, walking along the side of the mountain, looking down the terraced sides where the Black Hmong grew their rice. "Black Hmong cut all trees close to village" said Dom "Always cut trees". The view was fantastic; mountains and valleys folding out before us.

We continued walking, down off the top of the mountain, merging onto a path with some forest cover. Walking through the forest Dom advised us that there were still tigers in these parts, along with monkeys, wild pigs, porcupines, and poisonous snakes (including 4-5 meter long pythons).

Misadventures in Far Away Places

Actually, I had read that 150 species of land snakes exist in Thailand, over half of which are venomous – including the King Cobra and the Russell’s Pit Viper (one of the most dangerous snakes in the world.) With that happy thought in mind, we continued down through the forest, the air pleasantly cool from the altitude and the forest cover. Dom motioned to us; “This is dividing line between Black Hmong and Karen village. Soon will be in Karen village.” We never saw any dividing line, the forest seemed the same except for the increasing amount of underbrush and foliage as we descended into the valley. About 15 minutes later we saw a huge pile of excrement off to the side of the path -“Holy cow!” I exclaimed, “I don’t want to run into whatever did that!” We did, 2 minutes later, a large water buffalo munching grass on the side of a stream, fixing us with an evil-looking stare. Within minutes we came out to a clearing, dogs barking at us, announcing our arrival in the Karen village.

The Karen are the most populous minority among the Hill tribes and have migrated into Thailand from Myanmar (Burma). The most noticeable immediate difference from the Black Hmong are the houses – the homes are built of bamboo about 5 feet off the ground on stilts. Under the home pigs, goats, dogs and children run, squeal and snort around. The Karen village was very small (about 10 homes) and quiet (Dom explained that the men were off to work). Dom knew exactly where he was heading and soon we were greeted by a very friendly woman who invited us into her home. We climbed the bamboo ladder and all sat down on a kind of roof –topped patio. Dom and the woman chatted and laughed; Dom told us jokingly that he would steal her from her husband. The floor of the structure was made of the same, identical bamboo as the ladder – thin strips of bamboo sticks which were incredibly strong and resistant as we would soon find out. “Question. How do people have sex here?” barked Dom. “If they have sex they wake up village with noise of bamboo, so how they have sex?” Hmm, never thought of that. “They have sex in forest!” exclaimed Dom.

The woman had two kids and while filming with my video I had the bright idea of turning the retractable lens so that they could see themselves on the screen – the reaction was amazing. The kids started jabbering excitedly, their voices brought friends – within 5 minutes there were 15 kids sitting around us talking excitedly and pointing at themselves on the screen (must be a lot of people having sex in the forest at night I thought, a veritable fuckfest...) An old woman joined the kids a few minutes later, smiling and preening at the camera. I couldn’t believe the reaction and wondered if they had mirrors in the village, or if they had actually never seen themselves before. I had every villager sitting in front of me, staring at themselves on the video. I suddenly wondered if I had forever screwed up the culture of this village with my western technology. I could see the headlines “Stupid tourist brings video camera to Karen village. Kids vacate village in search of television and Nintendo.”

We left the village, the kids waving at us and the woman inviting us back to sleep in their home. We continued on our way through the heavy foliage of the valley. Again and again Dom would stop and point things out to us; “When have shit too much, eat green banana. Green banana make you stop shit” Or; “This is cork tree. With cork tree village make sticks for ice cream because is soft.” We saw fig trees, and different types of bamboo “People eat bamboo, is sweet. But too much bamboo no good for stomach and bad for teeth. Too much bamboo, have to eat green banana.”

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It was mid-morning and starting to heat up when we began climbing an escarpment. The geography had completely changed, we had left behind the lush valley and were in a bamboo jungle along the side of a mountain. Walking along a trail we looked down a steep incline to the river below and across to the mountains on the other bank of the river. We continued along the side of the mountain for a good hour, Franz in the back, sweat-soaked and already dirty from a couple of slips and spills in the dirt. Then the geography started to change again – bigger trees, darker soil, and rougher terrain – we started to descend into another valley, climbing down rocks, a small waterfall, sliding on our behinds and grabbing tree roots so we wouldn't fall. We descended for about half an hour, finally arriving by the river that we had seen from higher up the mountain earlier that morning.

We had a 20 minute lunch break by the river eating something Dom had picked up at the market – we were each given a bundle wrapped up in banana leaves, inside was a ball of tightly packed mushy rice with a custard filling. Then he gave us bananas (in case any of us was getting ideas about needing to go to the bathroom...) On again we went, negotiating our way up the river, climbing up boulders, around fallen trees. It was past noon, we were exposed to the sun and it was hot.

We heard it in the jungle before finally reaching it. At least 100 feet high, the waterfall cascaded through high cliffs above, crashing down into a large clear pool at the bottom. The falls had created a smooth wall on the cliff, a fine cool mist hung on the air. We stripped and put on our bathing suits (Hans and Franz wore little speedos, eeech!) and jumped in the cold, clean pool of water. We stood with our backs against the rock-wall, the water falling over us from above. It was fantastic, the highlight of the trek.

Back in our clothes, we walked on through the jungle and saw incredibly high trees that had ladders running up their sides – “Radders for honey” said Dom. Holy cow, I wouldn't have climbed that on Fear Factor for \$50,000, never mind a jug of honey. I asked Dom a few questions; on malaria – “Only in wet season, not now, is dry season. Last year 30 people die of malaria in Mae Hong Son”; on tourists – “Many stupid tourists, many have accident when rent motorcycle. Drink beer, ride motorcycle. Many stupid tourist”; on the Long-neck people (the tribe made famous by the brass necklaces worn around their necks) “Many people not like Longneck. Too many tourists. Make much money. Many poor hill tribe people in Thailand that have no money.” Dom was very interesting and it was obvious during our trek that he loved what he did and was very much in touch with the village people as well as the jungle. I ended the day quite envious of this man's life.

On we went, Franz looking like a wet rag behind us with beer sweat dripping off his ears, nose and chin, and his orange julep shirt wet and dirty. Hans hadn't bothered changing back into shorts after the swimming, he was hiking with his green speedos – made me think for a minute I was back in Quebec. I should have presented him with an award as an honorary Quebecker, maybe a poutine. The geography changed and we were walking through hardwood forests, then through a river gorge between mountains. We crossed the river several times in water up to our waists. Suddenly ahead of us was a dam and a park, a pickup truck waiting for us. Our trek was over. We were soaked and exhausted, but it was the sort of exhaustion you feel when you've accomplished or experienced something special. Sylvie's face was flush with happiness; it made

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me feel great. It had been an amazing day. We bumped our way back to Mae Hong Son in the back of the pickup, watching the setting sun reflecting off green rice paddies.

Shopping in Chiang Mai / transsexuals

We went back to Chiang Mai for an evening – it was our last night in Northern Thailand before going on to Ko Samui the next day. We stocked up on souvenirs and learned that bargaining did not require an extensive vocabulary. “Cheap, Cheap” was a common beckoning call, as in “T-shirt, cheap, cheap.” Or when bargaining, during intense negotiation, the salesman would roll his eyes sadly “Is cheap, cheap” where I would counter “No is cheap, cheap.” “Same, same” was also extensively said – “No T-shirt like that in big. Have this. Is same, same.”
“How much is it”
“Cheap, cheap – like other shirt.”

We shopped until boxes, mats, silk cloths, t-shirts, wooden toys, masks, porcelain figurines, carpets, and silk underwear were popping out of our ears. We had another great Thai meal, then went to a bar where we were hoping to see Thai box. The ring stood there, empty, a few men dressed as women were sitting at the bar. It seemed to be a transsexual bar. Anyway, Sylvie and I had a drink and when it became obvious that the transsexuals weren’t about to slap each other silly (and really, what good are transsexuals if not for cheap entertainment?) we went back to the People Place and went to bed.

Ko Samui – first impressions

Lonely Planet; “This beautiful island off south-eastern Thailand is covered with coconut plantations and circled by (call us clichéd but it’s true) palm-fringed beaches. It was once an ‘untouched’ backpackers’ mecca, but is now well on its way to becoming a fully-fledged tourist resort.” You don’t realize what a tourist trap Ko Samui is until arriving on this island – tourists with American Tourister suitcases, men in Hawaiian shirts, annoying British girls with braided hair, pizza, McDonalds, KFC, no-vacancy signs all over the place, tacky little stores selling kitschy crap. Very few Thais except for those funny brown people who seem to work either at hotel reception, stores, or as taxi drivers (they weren’t great either, we had our first encounters with pushy, unfriendly Thais – even in Bangkok they were friendly, even if they were screwing the crap out of you.) On top of this, prices are double that of anywhere else in Thailand.

Ko Samui was the only place in Thailand where I’ve felt uncomfortable. And honestly, there are so many beautiful islands and beaches in Thailand that, unless a resemblance to Fort Lauderdale is what you’re looking for, you’d do a lot better almost anywhere else in Thailand. In fact, the islands in the Andaman Sea just a little further south are much more beautiful and offer geographical features that you don’t see in Ko Samui. There is no comparison. Okay, so I hate the place.

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We booked the Natiem Resort in Chawang at 1,500 baht a night (approx. US\$35.) Actually we booked it at the airport and it was our first time in Thailand where we had a hard time finding a room in our price range (which at \$35 is ‘moderate’ on Ko Samui, but ‘expensive’ in other parts of Thailand).

Chawang beach in Ko Samui is the most popular, touristy beach on the island. The main road running through Chawang is an endless strip of hotels, restaurants, bars, photo shops, diving shops and postcard and souvenir shops. Unlike Patong beach in Phuket however, Chawang is sanitized because of the isolation of Ko Samui from the mainland – no girlie bars and very few Thais. It’s this resort feel that I particularly dislike – Ko Samui could have been any tropical beach, anywhere in the world.

We checked into our hotel, went to the beach and tried to read amidst the herd of tourists (a bunch of foul-mouthed British tourists I found especially annoying.) We showered, then had an expensive seafood supper and a few beers watching the tourist hordes. The hooting, tooting traffic consisted mostly of pickup trucks sporting signs on upcoming events; Thai boxing, Bungee jumping, Go-Karting, Cabarets...

Sylvie and I got into a fight the next day – I had filmed her on the beach which she took exception to. ‘I look fat, I don’t want to be filmed.’ ‘No, no, you look fine!’ I replied. She got angry, the tears flowed, ‘Okay, okay, I’m erasing it now!’ Women.

We took a taxi to Big Buddha beach (North-east part of the island on the map) where we saw a Big Bronze Buddha not really worth mentioning. I went for fried noodles and a beer and Sylvie went for a fortune (‘The fortune teller told me you’re not the man of my life,’ she said upon coming back. ‘I could have told you that,’ I thought.) We weren’t having one of our good days – I think we were both disappointed with Ko Samui.

Ko Samui – Off the beaten path; Hin Lad / Na Thon

‘Okay, we have to get our butts into gear and make the most out of this hellish tourist paradise!’ This is what I really liked about Sylvie. We collected a map, took out our Lonely Planet, put on our running shoes, and jumped into the back of a pickup taxi.

Our plan was to go to the Hin Lad waterfall which was close to Na Thon – the only ‘real’ town on Ko Samui. Na Thon is on the western part of the island totally opposite from Chawang beach. It took 45 minutes to get there, the taxi driver dropping us off in front of a road; ‘Hin Lad,’ he said, pointing vaguely... we understood we had a bit of walking to do. We got out, walked around, and got lost, ending up outside a monastery. An old smiling monk came up to us and we tried to explain that we were looking for the falls. I made water swooshing noises so he could understand and which I’m sure impressed him. He pointed us in the right direction and we were off again. 2 km later we arrived at a signpost; ‘Hin Lad Waterfall.’ Woo Hoo! The river had large, eroded boulders and peaceful pools of water – but didn’t hear any cascading ‘whooshing’,

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the usual sound of water crashing down rocky abysses that you'd usually associate with the word 'waterfall.' Nevertheless, we proceeded to climb up boulders, making our way up 'the river' to the waterfall. After 15 minutes, we arrived at the waterfall, or at least we thought we did. The river was no longer negotiable, there were large rocks from which water could theoretically have flowed down... in fact the only flow of water was coming out of a pipe, a pipe about 8 cm in diameter sticking out from the rocks. It had less water pressure than the average kitchen faucet in Afghanistan.

Oh well, at least we had had a nice walk and had gotten away from the tourists for a little while. Walking back to the main road, the sun very quickly setting, a car came by with a man, his wife and 2 kids on the back. They enquired if we had to go somewhere, so we struck a deal and they drove us into the town of Na Thon.

We were dropped off at the Na Thon pier. Right across the street was a restaurant. That's where we went, up to the 2nd floor patio where we sat with a fantastic view of the sun setting over the South China Sea. It was beautiful and tranquil, and it suddenly seemed as if we were on a totally different, unspoilt island. Sylvie and I had a few beers while she ate huge oysters in very crude-looking shells. This was followed by a spicy fish soup, shrimps in green curry sauce and fried noodles with spicy chicken. The service was great and friendly and the prices were the usual Thai prices (ie. non-Ko Samui prices. We paid 500 baht for too many beers to count and enough food for 2 meals – that's about \$11 US) Sitting under the stars, looking out over the pier and at the fishing boats far off in the horizon, it was one of our most memorable evenings in Thailand.

Getting To Ko Samui: Can Fly here direct with Bangkok Airways which is what we did, flew in from Bangkok, flew out to Phuket. Can also fly with Thai to Surat Thani on the coast and take the ferry across from there to the Na Thon pier. Alternatively the train or buses also make their way down the peninsula to Surat Thani. Suggest that flights to Ko Samui as well as hotels be pre-booked. Only place in Thailand I have come across where I recommend this.

Hin Lad Waterfall: Go in rainy season when there IS a waterfall. Not worth going in the dry season.

Beer: Three major Thai beers, in order of popularity; Singua, Chang, Leo. I like all 3, but preferred the Leo – I often had a hard time finding it however. Thai beer packs a punch; Singua has 6.8 % alcohol content.

Ko Samui – Lamai Beach & the topless Italian

Lamai beach is the 2nd most popular beach on Ko Samui. Unlike Chawang which revolves around one big, main road, Lamai has a few small streets where you can browse around, it feels much more relaxed. The beach is also very different – the white sand is dotted by huge boulders, the water is rough, characterized by big waves and strong currents. Palm trees bend in the wind. At the end of Lamai beach are large rocky outcrops which the adventurous can climb – climbing up the rocks brings you to a Ko Samui landmark – 'Hin Ta – Hin Yai' (the 'Grandfather Rock.') These are famous, strange rock formations – one huge rock that looks like a penis, another which

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looks like a vagina. According to locals, the rocks were created when the boat of an old man and an old woman crashed into the rocks, killing them I guess and splattering their genitalia, thereafter changing the landscape. We climbed the rocks. Actually, there was a couple among the rocks that I had my eyes on. I think they were Italian. The guy had his camera out and he was taking pictures of his girlfriend; she was a sexy, topless, olive-skinned beauty who posed sexily. She looked quite hot and I was zooming with the video camera getting a shot of those.... “FRANK! WHAT are you DOING??!” Oops...Sylvie got a bit pissed off at me “What would YOU think if I gawked and filmed another guy?!” Okay, okay, my fault I admit it...

After diving in the waves and climbing all afternoon, it was time for our favourite mode of relaxation – drinking beer. My mom once told me “Beer is not alcohol. Beer is basic nutrition, like liquid bread.” Okay, maybe it wasn’t my mom. We had a few beers at a small café on the beach as the sun was setting. Lamai has a wild, unspoilt beauty, if I ever had to come back to Ko Samui (which I wouldn’t do by choice) I would stay at Lamai beach.

Keys to Ko Samui if one insists on going: avoid Chewang Beach, Lamai beach is much nicer and more relaxed. It is also cheaper than Chewang. Ko Samui in its entirety, however, is very much overrated, overcrowded, and overly expensive and there really isn’t very much to see or experience here. Ko Samui highlights: The Big Buddha statue previously mentioned at Big Buddha Beach, “Hin Ta – Hin Yai”, Namuang Falls, Hin Lad Falls, The Magic Buddha Garden – nothing terribly extraordinary, Ko Samui best known as a place to lie on the beach and to party at night.

Ko Phangan – trapped in Chalok Lam

Ko Phangan is known as a beautiful, tranquil island slightly off the beaten trail. Much less expensive and less crowded than Ko Samui, it attracts the younger, backpacker crowd. The accent is on ‘very quiet and peaceful,’ all except for Hat Rin on the far south-west of the island “Rin Beach is the ideal for all kinds of pleasure that the young and young at heart are searching for. It is a venue for the world famous Full Moon Party happening every month on the sunrise beach. Hanging out, going to parties, meeting wild and weird people, matchmaking, listening to techno, garage, house music, marijuana, drugs and spiritual awakenings all can be experienced at Rin Beach. Hat Rin has all kinds of music to fit with everyone’s tastes and you’ll not be disappointed” says Thailand.com.

Hat Rin was not where we wanted to go, we wanted to go to a place called Had Kuat which was a small beach on the north end of the island, a place far, far away from any tourists. Anyway, that was the plan. So the next morning we went to the pier at Buphut beach (close to the Big Buddha) and took the ferry to Ko Phangan which meant about 35 minutes of our stomachs going shlish-shlosh, shlish-shlosh.... we were almost green by the time we reached the pier in Ko Phangan. Once there, we jumped into the back of a pickup truck and headed off.

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Up and down hills went the pickup, swerving and turning, up and down, our stomachs no longer shlish-shloshing, now more of an up-down motion – the contents of our stomachs at this point feeling like a ping-pong ball, the paddles being the lower intestinal area and the upper trachea area. In other words, we were both just about ready to puke and shit ourselves at the same time.

Going north there was no traffic at all. We finally arrived at a pier, a beach, and a few shacks along the beach. We were on the northern coast of Ko Phangan, a place called Chalok Lam. “Where is Had Kuat?” I asked the driver. “Have to take boat. 30 minute by boat.” Oops, didn’t know from the map this place was only accessible by boat. Suddenly Sylvie was white as a sheet, her face pasty and sweaty. “I don’t feel well. I need a toilet.” Being close to a toilet is the reason why we ended up spending the next two days in Chalok Lam.

Our time in Chalok Lam was like living in a drug-induced, comatose state. We rented a shack about 300 feet down the beach from the pier. It was on stilts and consisted of one room dominated by a large colourful bed. Large French-style windows opened outwards. Leaving the door and the windows open, the only sounds were the breeze rustling the surrounding palm trees and the waves lapping on the beach. Laying down we fell promptly asleep, the sounds paralyzing us. At one point I woke up and read while Sylvie was still sleeping. Then I fell asleep again.

That’s how it was for 2 days; going to the beach, reading, and napping in our 150 baht shack (\$3 US) We were quite content and relaxed and would take naps cuddled up in bed, the rustling of the palm trees and the waves interrupted only by the sounds of fisherman tying up their boats. At night we slept under mosquito nets. It was almost as if the gods had brought us to Chalok Lam and meant for us to stay. The third day was the same, the winds rustling the palm trees, the waves lapping the beach. We sat on the front porch, looking out mesmerized by the trees and the waves. “What should we do?” “I don’t know, what do you want to do?” We felt we had to do something, but neither of us felt like doing whatever we should be doing...so we sat there reading, listening to the rustling of the palm trees and the lapping of the waves...

We sprung a few springs early that afternoon (ie. had hot sex) and broke the curse of Chalok Lam! Seizing the newly energized opportunity we packed very hurriedly and vacated the shack, leaving the fat shack lady cursing and waving her arms at us for passing checkout time. We jumped on another pickup and got out of Chalok Lam, almost expecting instantaneous and simultaneous vomiting and diarrhoea to force us back... but we had offended the gods and they no longer wanted us. We were off to Hat Rin!

Ko Phangan – Drugs & music in Hat Rin

There is one Hat Rin by day, another Hat Rin by night.

Hat Rin by day was a pleasant surprise. The town is situated in a cove book-ended by large, hike-able cliffs. We arrived mid-afternoon and easily found a nice, spacious shack for 500 Baht (US\$10.) We then went off on a hike up the cliffs to a viewpoint where we had superb views of the cove and the surrounding cliffs.

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“BOOM, BOOM, BOOM” – Hat Rin waking up. The music is so loud in Hat Rin that everything vibrates. Huge speakers are set up on the beach and the pounding, booming music pulsates all night – even if you stick toilet paper in your ears you still feel the vibrations “BOOM, BOOM, BOOM!” In the good old days we partied to AC/DC, Metallica, Def Leppard, the Beastie Boys... not this boring, repetitious techno crap – they should call it ‘Construction’ music instead of ‘Techno’ or ‘Garage’, the pounding and vibrating was like sleeping on a construction site. Hat Rin is just a first-world party town. The music is European, the tourists are European, North American, or Aussie kids – typical middle-class kids. Even the bars and hotels are owned by tourists who never wanted to leave the party. The only thing Thai about this place is the location and the people who clean up the mess – we woke up early the next morning to see a team of Thais with plastic bags and rakes cleaning up the beach (no doubt used condoms and syringes as well as the usual beer caps, cigarette butts etc.) A little later, at the ferry pier, we saw a young couple hooked up to IV’s being helped by Thai nurses to a private boat. “Maybe they ate something bad” said Sylvie.

“Yeah, right, must have been that chicken in green curry sauce again – whenever I eat that I bring an IV bottle just in case. I hate when that happens.”

I have fond memories of Ko Phangan (excluding Hat Rin.) It reminded me of Ko Samet; you could easily come here and spend a month in a cheap shack on a beautiful beach far away from it all. I might just come here again with a pile of books and a few dirty magazines when I retire.

Phuket – Khao Phra Thaeo National Park / The Hike

It was our last full day in Thailand. We decided we wanted an adventure, no beaching it for us – we were going hiking! Of all the tour operators in Phuket, only one offers a jungle trek (most operators offer only expensive water-based tours). But they were full up. We were very disappointed. The travel agency did however give us the map of the park used by the tour group. We also did a little of our own research.

“Khao Phra Thaeo National Park – is 20 km north west of Phuket city and covers Phuket’s last primary rain forest – the reserve’s royal status helps make protection more effective. There are many bird species and mammals including wild boar and monkeys. The reserve has several forest trails for hiking and guides can be hired from the reserve office. Two beautiful waterfalls can be found in the reserve at Nam Tok Ton Sai and, on the eastern edge of the reserve, at Bang Pae” says siamwanderer.com.

“We can do this by ourselves” said Sylvie. “We have a map. It’s even better this way, we don’t have to wait around for slowpokes like Franz.”

We put on our hiking shoes, grabbed some water, and jumped into a taxi. It took us about 45 minutes from Kata beach to get to Khao Phra Thaeo National Park (almost dead center in the island of Phuket). The hiking trails all start at the tourist center right next to a waterfall. Arriving, I asked the taxi driver if he could come and pick us up at 5 PM at the ‘other’ waterfall – that gave us about 4 hours to go upstream into hillier terrain, make a loop, coming back along another

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stream which leads to the second waterfall. It suited the driver, a 45 minute ride makes them good money.

We started out walking along a well-defined path next to the river with dense jungle foliage everywhere. It was beautiful and everything we expected – there were many rapids and falls in the river and we had to do a lot of climbing, using rocks and trees to make our way upstream. Along the river were all kinds of palm trees and large, leafy shrubs. We were quite amazed – here in the middle of Phuket, a huge touristy island, was a wild, tropical jungle! It made me think of the rainforests of the Amazon. Boy, I would have hated slipping and falling in these rapids – the terrain was so rough you could easily break a leg and never get out alive. Getting lost would have been horrible too, it could take days to get out of this jungle if you didn't know your way around.

We easily followed the path into higher ground. I started to doubt the distances indicated on our map – supposedly it was a 5 km hike, yet some of the signs (which also indicated distance) were way off and in some cases contradictory. Nevertheless our map was quite accurate in terms of landmarks and we continued along the river, which gradually faded behind us. We came upon an area of higher, drier ground with hardwood trees. Along the path were large, dry leaves from the trees which increasingly covered the ground.

We crossed a small stream and went further into higher ground, following a path which subsequently disappeared into the leaves. On and on we went, following the trail through the trees. The trail became narrower and wilder and forced us to climb over (or duck under) trees. But the trail – if you looked for it – was there. Or so we thought. Until we looked ahead to a dead-end full of mangled trees where there could never have been a path. And when we looked behind us, we wondered how the hell we could have made it through the bush that had seemingly closed behind us. And that's when we realized we were lost.

Don't panic! Think! I was the man, I had to be calm. But my heart was pounding and if Sylvie hadn't been there I would have started squealing like Porky Pig. "Okay" I said, "We came from that direction, we crossed a stream, we came uphill. We have to get back to the stream and follow that downstream. It's going to lead us to the waterfall."

We spent the next 45 minutes going through totally wild bush, brutal without a machete. Stepping over logs, through bushes, pushing aside branches, going through undergrowth, going right through spider webs. A large, hand-sized black and red spider ran away inches from my face. The worst were the spikes – a particular variety of palm tree has 5cm long, hard spikes which could easily penetrate deep into flesh. How I didn't step on one is still beyond me.

After what seemed like an eternity, the terrain started to descend. I was starting to wonder about the stream – maybe we had wandered too low or too high and the stream had turned away from us? That thought stuck in my mind and panic was in my head if not my body. "We have a map, we can do it on our own, don't need someone like Franz slowing us down" blah, blah, blah – fine fucken idea.

Amazingly we arrived at a stream. It wasn't half as large as we remembered it. It was a piddly little stream. But it had water and a current which we hoped pointed in the right direction.

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We followed the stream. At times it was easy, then suddenly there would be large boulders which we would have to climb over. The stream was a typical oxbow – long, slow curves. We weren't getting anywhere fast at all. At one point the stream looked as if it was petering out and losing energy – a dead end. But then more water. We were starting to get nervous – the sun was getting lower and we could see the change in the light. If it got dark we would have to sleep in the jungle. Our China Airlines plane was leaving the next day at 5:15 in the afternoon. Ironically, the airport was only a few kilometres away. Maybe we would see it pass overhead.

More water, more rocks and big boulders in the stream. Climbing over one, my feet slipped out from under me and I fell backwards, sticking my hands out behind me to block the fall. I knew I had hurt something, but with the adrenaline of panic I barely paused. We kept on going. Suddenly I spotted something – a nice, well-worn path. I knew we were saved. Sylvie wasn't convinced "Maybe it'll lead us further into the jungle". "No, we have to take the path, It follows the stream and the stream goes downhill." Not only that, we could move a lot quicker on the path.

Making good distance, we turned a corner and suddenly, about 50 feet from us, sitting on logs, were a bunch of tourists having a snack. A Thai and 4 tourists. I had never in my life been so happy to run into a bunch of tourists! Thank god for tourists, I'll never say a bad word about them again! They looked at us like we were on crack. I spoke to the guide, explained what had happened.

"Next time book tour, no get lost!"

This was the tour we'd wanted to take but that had been fully booked.

Sylvie and I joined the tour, hiking along the same path for another 2 km before coming upon the 2nd waterfall. We stripped down and bathed in the pools under the falls. It was beautiful.

The taxi was waiting in the parking lot as we walked out of the forest with the tour group. It was barely past 5 PM. We thanked the guide profusely, gave him a great tip, and got in the taxi. "I thought maybe you got lost" said the taxi driver, "Many tourist get lost."

"No, no problems" we replied at the same time.

We were quick to realize how stupid and how lucky we had been. I came out of it with cuts and scratches all over my legs and arms and a sprained wrist which was swollen and blue. We relaxed in the swimming pool with a beer, then went to Patong to shop and have supper. We finished our final night in Thailand with some Thai Box.

Flying home

Flight day – We were flying Phuket to Chiang Kai Shek in Taiwan. From there, we had a 24 hour stopover before flying from Taiwan to New York. From New York we would fly American Airlines to Montreal. We had great fun in Phuket airport with a mechanized ‘massage chair’ – Sylvie was laughing her head off watching me suffer in this chair. It was our last Thai massage. That alone was a sad thought.

Flying back always seems so much longer than flying there. We stayed a night at the Chiang Kai Shek Airport Hotel where we saw Celine Dion being interviewed by Larry King on CNN. We thought that was a good enough reason to get drunk, so that’s what we did. 24 hours in Taiwan was 24 hours too many, we were happy to get back on the plane. We had a non-stop, never-ending flight on an Airbus 340 to New York, arrived at 11PM, then had to walk out in the cold and board a propeller plane for the 1 hour flight to Montreal. We arrived in Montreal. Sylvie and I took the taxi. I dropped her off at her place. Then I got home and went through my telephone messages. I had a drink and sat down on the sofa. I was already missing Thailand.

Thailand is an absolutely great place. The people are fabulous, the food delicious, the geography amazing and the beaches among the world’s best. It is very inexpensive. It is also very safe, even for a woman travelling alone. There are places for every traveller, depending on what you want – from laid back and cheap Ko Samets and Ko Phangans where you can stay months living cheaply – to the upscale Ko Samuis and Phukets where you can pay North American prices for luxury. Thailand has it all.

The places that Sylvie and I visited on this trip are quite typical, one-month itineraries. Lonely Planet suggests one week to one month itineraries and our choice of destinations was based primarily on our reading of LP. You never want to go halfway around the world and miss the ‘best sites’, although ‘best sites’ are disputable. I don’t know how Ko Samui ever got so high on the list, for example. One thing I can suggest is that it is really worth getting off the beaten path in Thailand. Knowing what we know now, we would have been much less shy to be adventurous. We would definitely have skipped Ko Samui and Ko Phangan and would have spent more time in Northern Thailand. We would definitely have gone on a three day trek in the mountains and slept in Hill tribe villages. We would have gone on from Mae Hong Son and maybe gone further north, to Chiang Rai. But, as is always the case, time is the determining factor and between every destination you lose half a day to a day travelling; getting to airports, buses, boats or trains. Thailand is very tourist friendly and the infrastructure is better than in most parts of Europe – this is a perfect country for the independent traveller. Anyone who comes here on a package tour is just plain stupid. It is a fabulous country. Just don’t buy gems. And stay here as long as you can – a month is almost not enough here.

A Final Word

The fortune teller in Ko Samui was right – Sylvie and I broke up about a month later. We managed (barely) to work through conflicts on our trip, but everyday life brought up new

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conflicts which we could not get over. Honestly, the incentive wasn't there – we became close on the trip but it wasn't enough. She is a good person and it made me sad; but in the end we were just too different.

I did however get another chance to see Sylvie's father before the break-up. I was invited to a BBQ at the family house in the country. We shook hands and both tried to be civil. I even asked about his Harley Davidson. During the meal I got into an interesting conversation with Sylvie's younger sister who was studying to be a journalist – she mentioned that she had a friend who was travelling around Africa, he was in Niger on a contract as we were speaking. That's when her dad butted in; "Honey, you mean Nigeria. It's called Nigeria, not Niger". It was handed to me on a spoon, like giving candy to a baby. I couldn't help it. "Niger is a landlocked country in West Africa, just next to Chad. Its mostly desert. The capital is Niamey". I said it matter-of-factly while keeping a straight face. But our eyes met and I came that close to doing my best Ace Ventura impersonation; 'You're a Loo-hoo-hoo-ser!!' I felt like Shaquile O'Neal with my geographical slam-dunk. If George had been there we would have been doing high-fives.

Sylvie and I tried to sell those blue sapphires for about a year. But we couldn't get anything decent for them and finally gave up. From time to time I'll run into her on the bicycle path or at a bar and we'll chat for a few minutes. But we never talk about the trip. It's almost as if it never happened.

The Dominican Republic

I needed a getaway! Work was getting to me, winter was making me sick, my hockey team hadn't made the playoffs. I hadn't even really dated anyone seriously since Sylvie (almost a year ago). What a loser. I was depressed.

I've been to the Dominican Republic before; I went there many years ago (1995) on an all-inclusive package and spent a week under the sun relaxing and getting turista. I hadn't seen much. A day into my vacation and my stomach would suddenly spin and make noise like a washing machine on "Pots and pans" mode – I became known as "El gringo rapido" amongst the hotel staff, the fastest Canadian to make the 100 meter dash since Ben Johnson. That was partly to blame for my trepidation of leaving the hotel. In actual fact, I had also been a bit intimidated by the sight of Dominicans living in corrugated metal shacks among open sewers on the opposite side of the bay from our large, luxurious, 3-swimming pool hotel. Intimidated and guilty to be a rich, white face.

Unfortunately, private beaches and the confines of a resort are the extent of what most travelers see of the Dominican Republic – the majority come here on all-inclusive packages and don't meet any locals except Maria the room lady and Juan the guy who makes the diarrhoea-inducing omelettes at the breakfast counter. The country has a well-deserved reputation as corrupt and poor; most people also think it's violent. I know I hadn't strayed too far from my hotel.

Having survived a few independent trips abroad, I decided that I was going to "Discover" the Dominican Republic. Well, maybe "Discover" is a strong word – this was a mini-vacation, I only had a week. But I wanted to get a "feel" of the Dominican Republic, something I hadn't done the first time. Meet people, practice my Spanish (I had taken lessons but it was far from good), dance merengue, drink rum, and smoke cigars on the beach.

I booked a last minute flight to Puerto Plata (Canadian \$629, appr. \$500 US) and reserved myself 3 nights at the Caribe Surf Hotel in Cabarete (\$ 24 US/night). My plan was to skip around the different northern coastal towns; Cabarete was to be the first. It would be a nice relaxing beach trip. That was the plan.

Puerto Plata – Gregorio Luperon Airport

It was dark and a little after 9 PM when we landed at Puerto Plata's Gregorio Luperon Airport. This airport has undergone major renovations in recent years, Gregorio Luperon is now a modern and efficient airport. I quickly passed through customs and went to the luggage carousel where my backpack was one of the first pieces of luggage to roll off the belt. I heaved it on my back and headed for the exit. The last time I was here I had been hassled and had ended up paying some guy \$ 10 US to carry my bag 10 feet to the nearest minibus. I knew better this time; I strolled out of the airport with a confident air, past the luggage handlers and tour company representatives, and headed to the taxi stand.

Brief History; The Tainas, thought to have migrated from what is now Venezuela, occupied present day Hispaniola when Christopher Columbus “discovered” the island in December of 1492. The Tainas were peaceful people (incidentally, they introduced tobacco to the world) and had no chance against the Spanish who enslaved the Tainas and used them to dig up gold in mines. Gold was a major reason the Spanish had as much interest as they did in Hispaniola; in 1496 they started the building of Santo Domingo and designated it as the capital of the New World.

By 1520 the Tainas had been wiped out by bad treatment and Old World diseases. That’s when the Spanish started bringing in slaves from Africa. By that time the gold mines had also been depleted, so the colony turned to cattle raising and sugar production.

Much of the 16th and 17th centuries were spent fighting against the French and the English. The French took control of Santiago (the DR’s 2nd largest city) in 1677. By 1679 the war ended with the signing of a treaty splitting Hispaniola among the French and the Spanish.

By the late 1700’s, the French and Spanish were at it again: in 1795 a treaty was signed giving control of the entire island to the French. But the purchase of Louisiana in 1803 led to the abandonment of Hispaniola by the French. This led to the first black republic in the New World: Haiti.

From 1821 to 1843 the Dominican people were under Haitian rule. On February 27, 1844 (still celebrated as Dominican Independence Day), Juan Pablo Duarte and fellow separatists overthrew the Haitian representatives in Santo Domingo. Within weeks the Dominican Republic was born. A line of corrupt leaders brought war with Spain (the 1864 Restoration war, where the Spanish finally decided to throw in the towel) and the assassination of hundreds of political opponents. The situation was such a mess that at one point there were 2 governments; one in Santiago, another in Santo Domingo

Things improved when the liberal Azules party, led by Gregorio Luperon (who the airport in Puerto Plata is named after) took power in 1879. The Azules brought down the national debt while improving the infrastructure and the educational system.

All was good until a subsequent successor to the presidency, General Ulises Heureaux, came into power in 1882. General Heureaux created a climate of fear (assassinating opponents) and patronage to stay in power. He also drained the country’s treasury, all the while running up huge debts with American creditors. Heureaux was assassinated in 1899. The Dominican government was so economically ruined by this time that the US government intervened to insure all the country’s debts.

The first years of the 1900s brought more corruption and two brief civil wars.

Ramon Caceres came into power in 1905 and did a lot for the Dominican Republic; education, telephone, and transportation infrastructure were greatly improved. Caceres was assassinated however in 1911.

The assassination led to more bloody rebellions. The US government stepped in (they considered revolutions in the Caribbean as a threat to American national security) and the Dominican Republic was under US control from 1916 to 1924.

By 1924 the geo-political landscape had changed and the US left.

Corrupt politics returned in 1928 with the presidency of Rafael Trujillo. He stole from the army’s budget, hired friends to high political positions, and assassinated or imprisoned political rivals.

He created a terrorist group which roamed the country killing anyone who posed a threat to him. In 1937 he ordered soldiers to kill Haitians who had crossed the border to settle in the Dominican Republic – they did, killing approximately 20,000 of them (the Dominican government later paid

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the Haitian government US 525,000 in reparations).

Trujillo led directly and indirectly until his assassination in 1962. The Dominican Republic fell once again into civil war. Again the US intervened, occupying the DR until new elections were organized.

There were more corrupt leaders. In the mid-1980s, the Dominican Republic had to negotiate its debt through the IMF. There was more mismanagement and corruption in the early 1990's during the presidency of Joaquin Balaguer (an ex Trujillo puppet). The economy worsened and there were more and more street protests which usually ended with police and soldiers firing upon demonstrators. Many Dominicans fled their homeland (in 1990 it was calculated that 900,000, 12 % of the population, had moved to New York).

In 1996, Leonel Fernandez, a lawyer who grew up in New York, became president in free elections. He promised changes and delivered; during his four years in presidency the Dominican Republic had strong economic growth and it managed to lower inflation, unemployment and illiteracy rates.

Hipolito Mejia succeeded Fernandez. His presidency has not been popular; economic growth has tumbled and unemployment has risen. As have the number of protests in the street. He has not been assassinated however, which is a pretty good thing for a Dominican leader...

Dominican Republic – now and then...

Cabarete (about 25 minutes from Puerto Plata) is the most popular tourist town on the north coast of the Dominican Republic; it is internationally renowned as one of the best windsurfing bays in the world. The town supposedly attracts a young, athletic, and international crowd that "Plays in the day and parties at night". The last time in the Dom Rep I had stayed in Sosua which is about 10 minutes west of Cabarete – the place had felt like a wild-west town; "Town" had actually been a big word for it, Sosua had been a few restaurants, hotels and bars in a small, 2 block central area, electrical wires hanging everywhere. Everything had looked temporary. I remember a hunch-backed juvenile dwarf with tiny, dysfunctional legs, getting around by "walking" on his hands like a monkey. Then there were the prostitutes, standing on small, dark streets with cracked sidewalks. And I remember a sombre, unlit highway, the dark broken only by the headlights of motorcycles driven by young men. That and the fires; metal barrels with angry flames signalling construction. Everything had seemed so primitive. I had been overwhelmed by the poverty and the lack of infrastructure. The Dominican Republic had seemed poorer than the worst I had seen in South-Central Africa.

This time around, driving to Cabarete, it seemed to me that things had gotten better. Everything seemed cleaner, more civilized; the airport, the taxi (a nice minivan), the highway, the houses along the way...everything had improved. The only thing that brought memories of my previous trip was a stretch close to Sosua where a few girls in mini-skirts were standing next to the highway across from a third-worldish looking amusement park – the kind of amusement park where the Ferris wheel looks like it had fallen from its bearings (crushing the seats and those in them), rolled uncontrollably (grinding off all the paint), and veered crazily onto the highway before meeting a truck head on (hence the strangely triangular shape of the wheel and crazy black streaks that looked like a mix of grease, skid marks, and burning oil). Apart from the

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amusement park, the drive to Cabarete is for the most part down a quiet stretch of highway lined by lush trees and vegetation.

Cabarete

Lights and several hotels signalled our entry into Cabarete, followed by a few blocks of gaily-lit roadside restaurants, bars, and tourist shops. Cabarete is not a big place, it actually reminded me of some of Thailand's beach towns with its one-story buildings and small, homey-looking restaurants. We drove about 500 meters before turning off the main road. "Caribe Surf Hotel" announced a sign. I got out and followed a small, dark path through a tropical jungle full of palm trees to the reception area. A 40-ish something man was lounging in a chair; "Hola! Are you Frank?"

His name was Raphael and he showed me up to my room, taking me up the steps of a 3-story villa. Lizards scurried up the white walls. I was pleasantly surprised; a large, clean room, a fan on the ceiling, a wide screen door leading onto a large balcony. Nice room, well ventilated with a large and clean bathroom.

Lonely Planet's Thorn Tree Post is a very good, internet-based messaging board for anyone planning a trip and requiring up to date, first hand information (www.lonelyplanet.com). That's how I came across the Caribe Surf Hotel.

The flight hadn't relaxed me. Raphael told me where to go for a beer: "Best place is Las Brisas disco. Drink, dance, fuckie-fuckie if you like." I understood 'fuckie-fuckie' but Raphael demonstrated in case I didn't understand; separating his hands around hip level and breaking out with a couple of thrusts of the pelvis. Thinking that I still didn't understand, he slowed his humping to a circular grind while lifting his hands to the back of his head like a man stretching. A groan and a quick shake and he was done "you know fuckie-fuckie?" His English was good, he had spent several years in New York "I go to United States but I come back, I missed my family too much. I am Dominican. I love the Dominican Republic".

I took a little walk down the main road, passed Las Brisas and sat myself down at a little German restaurant. Even at 11:00 at night it was busy, filled with white, sunburnt tourists, most in their 40's and 50's and mostly German. I ordered a beer (el Presidente, the most popular brand in the DR) and started talking to an older British couple. They were sun burnt, drunk and happy. They had arrived in Cabarete 2 days previous and were staying a total of 10 days. They were actually very typical all-inclusive tourists; that night had been their first foray away from the resort and they already had the runs, which they announced almost happily over a beer. I had a few more beers and appreciated the laid-back, happy beach town atmosphere. I noticed a few chicas (chica = sexy Latina) crossing the street to Las Brisas; dark-skinned beauties wearing tight jeans and slinky mini-skirts. But I was tired, I decided I'd leave the dancing and partying for another night.

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I walked down the main road back to the hotel. I had a hard time falling asleep. The tropics were getting to me; the humidity, the swishing of the palm trees, the breeze from the large screen door washing over my body. I dreamt fitful dreams of sun, beach, and nubile young nymphettes giving me hungry, come-hither looks. If there had been shag carpeting in that room I would have shagged it.

Morning at the beach

I was up at 8, the sun streaming through the huge palms outside my balcony door. Birds chattered away, the early morning air fresh with the humid scents of the tropics. I put on my swimming trunks and T-shirt and strolled about 100 feet to the beach. Cabarete Bay, even this early in the day, is not as tranquil as other Caribbean beaches. There were waves, albeit small waves. Neither is the sand or water so spectacular. The sand is whitish, but nowhere as spectacularly white as in Varadero (Cuba) or Punta Cana (at the tip of the Dom Rep). And the water does not have that beautiful emerald blue, in fact, the breaking waves seemed to dump brownish water onto the beach. If you break it down, Cabarete Bay is really not that great, especially early in the day.

All along the beach, among palm trees, are thatched-roofed restaurants and bars with ‘Happening’-sounding places with names like Tribal Bar, Café Pitu (sounds like a place you would bring your dog), Tiki Bar, and there, in the middle, Las Brisas. There are also some small and quite upscale cafes along the beach – I sat myself down and had a cappuccino and a croissant while reading my Lonely Planet guide.

I decided to read at the beach. It was very quiet. Sometime around 10:30 a couple of cute blonde girls came with windsurfs. I might as well have been seagull shit because they totally ignored me. A few hawkers came up to me selling garbage (beads, t-shirts, sarongs). Most were pushy and not very friendly, although there was a nice one who I bought cigars from. I practiced my Spanish with him a while but this just seemed to incite laughter. Then there was a guy trying to get me to sign up for his company’s tour. It actually looked interesting – a tour in the mountains close to Puerto Plata, his book included pictures of overweight tourists prancing around under waterfalls and jumping from ledges into pools of water. But it was my first day on vacation and I didn’t want to lock myself into anything. He wouldn’t stop. Then he started to plead for money; “I no steal your bag, I ask for money,” he told me. I took that as a threat and told him to get lost.

All to say that one is hassled on the beach. If you are not interested the best thing to do is to kindly but firmly say “No gracias”. The difference between the Dominican Republic and Thailand or Malaysia is that they are much pushier here and sometimes won’t accept “No” for an answer. That’s when I start excavating in my nose and flicking the contents while simultaneously faking an episode of Turrets. I find that they usually leave when you do that.

All in all, I had a pretty boring time at the beach that morning. There was honestly nothing going on. Even “Iguana Mamas” was closed; they are reputedly the best adventure tour operators in the whole country (water sports, hiking, even mountain biking). I would have enjoyed taking a hiking tour. Typical – I tell myself that I’m just going to have a relaxing holiday in the sun and

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read lots of books. Then I get there and after 12 hours I'm already restless and bored. That's me in a nutshell.

Cabarete Bay / Playa Encuentro

I had lunch at a small restaurant on the beach and looked out over the bay. The winds had picked up and the water had turned from a dull aquamarine to a lively, dark marine blue. The blue of the water and horizon was broken by lovely, white-capped waves. And by colourful sails; the whole bay seemed to be full of them, windsurfers ridding waves near shore, and, further out, large parachute-like sails flying high above the water. Blowing palm trees added to the scenery. Even the sand seemed to have gotten whiter. Sometime around the noon hour Cabarete Bay had transformed itself into quite a pretty, lively bay.

I decided to walk down the bay towards Sosua, following the huge, colourful sails to a beach called Playa Encuentro. Playa Encuentro is about 2 km east of Cabarete; a small bay with gusting winds and treacherous looking rocks. It is the most popular location for kitesurfing. I was impressed. The sail for kitesurfing looks like a huge half moon. The control of these kites was impressive; just opening the kites and bringing them to the water usually required several people because of the force of the winds. All around the bay there were surfers shooting across the waves, turning and jumping about 30 feet into the air. I sat there and watched for about an hour, quite envious of the skill and camaraderie among the kitesurfers. They all looked very fit, young and attractive and, not for the first time, I felt quite cowardly. I have to admit I'm scared of water. The only water sport at which I excel involves baby oil and Mr. Bubble and is performed in the security of a bathtub. Actually, drowning is a re-occurring nightmare – if I had to choose between dying from drowning or from a fire (two of the worst ways to die in my opinion), I would chose fire. Among other things, at least you wouldn't be found bloated with blue lips and lots of wrinkles.

I walked back along the beautiful stretch of beach to Cabarete. It was quite beautiful, large waves everywhere breaking upon the shore. But I felt bored. Unlike my trips to Asia, I found people here kept to themselves. The few tourists seemed to be mostly couples, or groups of cliquish surfers. I didn't feel that openness to single people. It was quiet. The beachside restaurants and bars were empty. I hadn't encountered any Dominicans except for the pushy hawkers on the beach. I felt a bit lonely.

Chicas / Americans / Las Brisas

I showered and had some rum on my balcony watching the sunset through the palm trees. My body was warm from a day in the sun. I felt relaxed. I was getting into that holiday mood. Going downstairs, I met Rapheal "How are you man? Going fishing tonight?"

"Fishing? What do you mean?" I asked.

"Fishing for girls," responded Rapheal, spontaneously giving me that fuckie-fuckie humping thing. I gave Rapheal a cigar and we had a conversation about girls. According to Rapheal there

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are a lot of single men who come to the Dominican Republic; some for sex, many to meet a woman in the hopes of getting married.

“I can introduce you to good Dominican girl,” he said.

Tempting idea. I thought of asking Rapheal if he knew any girls that liked watching hockey games in bed while munching cookies and drinking beer. Hmm, maybe I just wasn't ready for a relationship yet.

I had an excellent meal at a seafood restaurant called La Casa del Pescador. It was 10ish by the time I finished. I wanted to listen to merengue music and dance but Las Brisas was quiet. I ended up having a couple of beers at an American-owned place with large screen TVs. God bless Americans, you always know you are in an American establishment because the owner comes right up to you, introduces himself, shakes your hand, asks you where you are from and welcomes you to his bar. Americans know how to greet a customer. It's always a bit of a shock when it happens and I have to admit that I got thrown off – I started talking to him, telling him my life story when I suddenly realized he really didn't give a shit about anything that I was saying. He just wanted to greet the next customer. I sat down in my seat and shut myself back up, a bit embarrassed. I don't know what's better, the fake cheer and friendliness of an American, or the relatively unfriendly European. At least you know what you get with the latter (at most a smile, at worst to be treated like a guest, an unwanted and unappreciative guest at that).

Anyway, I watched the first game of the hockey playoffs and was pretty happy. When it was over I took a walk. There isn't much to see in one-street Cabarete – it has upscale restaurants (French, German, even Thai) and some nice cigar and souvenir stores, but the majority of businesses were standard beach town fare. Nice but uninteresting. I decided to go to Las Brisas.

Las Brisas was like the set of a hot Latin music video. Merengue was booming out when I got there, the dance floor packed. There were tons of beautiful Dominican girls in sexy clothing; tight mini-skirts, some almost see-through, thongs accentuating curvaceous booties. Tight jeans with tight, low cut tops showing a lot of cleavage. A few wore silky, slinky dresses in pastel colours, the material clinging to curves. The girls were beautiful; dark skinned and exotic with dark hair and sultry eyes. Strobe lights and lasers worked the crowd of girls and tourists. I sat on a barstool next to a bunch of tourists, chit-chatting while drinking beer and watching all the action. In the background the surf lapped at the beach. Las Brisas was great.

Change of plans / On the road to Santo Domingo

I was back at Playa Encuentro the next day, watching the surfers and feeling inadequate again. I came to a conclusion walking back. I was bored with the beach scene. I needed a little excitement. Decided then and there what I would do. I was going to Santo Domingo, the DR's old, 'dangerous' capital on the Southern coast of the country.

I woke up at 7 the next morning (after another night of heavy beer drinking) and struggled to the main road with my backpack. I waited there until a “publico” pulled up – a publico is privately owned minivan and is a preferred mean of transport here. The driver asked me where I was

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going. “Caribe Tours, Susua” I replied. He got out, stuffing my backpack in the small trunk of the minivan while I climbed in.

The van was quite full of Dominicans; a couple of elderly women who were off to do their groceries, a good-looking young lady who looked like she was a secretary heading to work, a man with his arm around a young boy. I squeezed in the back next to a schoolgirl wearing a uniform, a grey skirt with a blue shirt, looking all spiffy for school. Everyone was well dressed and clean and I looked myself over and felt ashamed; a wealthy white tourist wearing wrinkled shorts and a t-shirt, unshaven and hung over. I could smell beer coming out of my pores. The schoolgirl looked up at me and squeezed away a touch. Argg – my mom wouldn’t have been proud.

We drove down the highway, making a few stops along the way to Sosua, the scenery mostly shrubby and sparse trees. We entered a town. “Senor, Caribe Tours!” one of the older women in the front was urgently motioning at me. My stop. I thanked her, got out and paid 30 pesos to the youth who was digging out my backpack from the trunk.

The Caribe Tours terminal was small and there were no buses in sight. I bought my ticket and sat down watching the action through the large windows. The intersection outside was full of early morning traffic; it was Monday and everyone was off to work and school. The terminal started filling up. Next to me sat a fat lady with big bags of food and a small girl. They were eating chicken and the little girl had greasy hands and big eyes that wouldn’t stop staring at me. Normally that wouldn’t have bothered me, I’m used to getting stared at by small kids when I travel. Even kids at home like to stare at me – thing is they don’t smile like they do when they look at most people, they look at me and have a troubled look as if I’m that guy Jason with the hockey mask. I smile at them and they usually start crying. Anyway, I wasn’t in a smiling mood, I was hung over and this kid with greasy hands was staring at me. I thought of doing my mock “Gagging-about-to-vomit” act so she would leave me alone (works wonders when trying to make room on the subway) but thought better of it. I already felt conspicuous being the only white guy in the terminal, besides which I was still embarrassed about my insalubrious condition.

I remember a kid, a small boy of about 2 years old, who played with the glass door of the terminal; opening the door, closing the door, re-opening the door... A lady came up to the door from the outside, middle aged and well-dressed, and had to gently open the door in order not to knock the little boy over. Once inside, she took him by the arm, knelt down to his level, and proceeded to give him a gentle lecture on how he shouldn’t be playing with the door. A few minutes later, the same scenario was repeated; a businessman came in with some parcels that he wanted couriered. Again the little kid got in the way. The man addressed the child and, with a wagging finger, told him not to play with the door. I struck me how different this treatment would have been in North America. In Canada a person would not have spoken to the child (god forbid you get sued for child or psychological abuse or for having infringed on his civil liberties). If anything he/she would have singled out the parent and given a dirty glance or made a commentary on the child’s behaviour (“Misbehaving little fuck, isn’t he?”). It reminded me of other scenes involving children and the sense of community, of getting involved, that you see in Latin America.

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At a little past 9, a driver walked into the terminal and announced the departure to Santo Domingo. We picked up our luggage and walked 100 feet down the street where a large, modern bus was waiting. I put my luggage underneath and climbed into the air-conditioned bus, settling myself in a comfortable chair at the window. Within minutes the bus started up and movies came on.

The first film was a trilingual piece of crap called the “Whole Nine Yards” starring Bruce Willis, a story about some killer living in Montreal. It was so bad I was embarrassed to be a white person – Dominicans must figure that North Americans always watch such stupid, meaningless drivel (which, let’s face it, we do). I instead concentrated on the scenery which became increasingly more interesting as we approached Puerto Plata. Behind Puerto Plata is 850 meter high Pico Isabel de Torres, a lush, beautiful mountain with gardens and a café at its top (on my previous trip I had gone up with the “Teleferico” and had been quite impressed by the views and the coolness at the top of the mountain).

The bus made its way into Puerto Plata through pleasant, clean streets bordered by 1 or 2 storied buildings and houses before pulling into the town’s bus station. More people got on and a well-dressed young businessman sat next to me.

Somewhere on the outskirts of Puerto Plata I fell asleep. I was amazed by what I saw when I woke up; we were driving through high hills, lush with vegetation and palm trees, their peaks so high that I couldn’t see the tops from my seat in the bus. I took out my video camera and filmed a bit. The young guy with the tie next to me was itching to talk, I could feel it.

“Hola, where are you from?” Ha, I knew it.

His name was Juan Jose and he was from Santo Domingo. He was 26 and worked as a salesman in the clothing business, which meant travelling from city to city visiting retail stores, usually gift shops that tourists frequented. He had a girlfriend in Puerto Plata, she was a clerk at a tourist store and they were engaged. He was very smooth, refined, light-skinned with short hair; a good-looking guy I thought. “Do you have friends in Santo Domingo?”, “Where are you staying?” (mind you, I’m translating, he didn’t speak any English). I responded “No” and “I don’t know” to these questions. I was honestly a little suspicious.

We entered another city which Juan Jose told me was Santiago. Santiago is the Dominican Republic’s 2nd largest city (550,000 population) and I was struck by the lushness everywhere. The metropolis is surrounded by verdant green mountains, the city itself is full of parks. High trees lined the streets. Juan Jose announced that he had to spend a few hours there. He pulled out his card and wrote his cell phone number “Franko, call me. Tonight I will be in Santo Domingo, we can go out”.

“Okay, thank you Juan Jose”. I honestly had no intention of calling him.

The bus continued on south. On the right, looking towards Haiti, high mountains dominated the landscape. I was very impressed by the geographical beauty and it dawned on me that most tourists didn’t realize that there was more to the Dominican Republic than just beaches and resorts. In fact, I read in Lonely Planet that more than 95% of tourists visiting the northwest coast stay in all-inclusives and that the only time they ever venture out is for the drive from and to the airport.

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More lushness, more mountains, until suddenly we descended and I caught a glimpse of ocean. It was only a brief glimpse – the bus made its way down a major metropolitan artery and everywhere there was traffic; big buses, small buses, minivans, cars, motorcycles. We were in Santo Domingo (The Dominican Republic's largest city with a population of approximately 2.4 million).

Presidential taxi ride

The bus made its way among large boulevards, onto and under huge cement overpasses, before pulling into a large bus terminal. I have to admit I felt a bit of trepidation getting out of that bus; here was a lone white guy, wearing beach shorts and a t-shirt. I had no idea where I was going. I was a mugger's wet dream. In cases like that, I usually just put on a fake sense of bravado. I walk and talk like I know exactly what I'm doing, like I'm in charge – kind of like Clint Eastwood in Dirty Harry. I spotted some taxis, gave the driver a hard time about the price ("I know what you're thinking punk, just try to hustle me. Go ahead, make my day"), then settled for 100 pesos for a ride to the Zona Colonial, the historic center of Santo Domingo.

The driver was a friendly, macho young guy who sped down the boulevards as if I was a foreign dignitary, swerving and yelling out to other drivers ("Hey! Hey!") while simultaneously pointing out and whistling at girls ("Mira la chica caliente! AiiiYA!"). He was therefore taken as much by surprise as I was with what happened next.

We were rounding a corner, turning onto a large boulevard, when we suddenly came face to face with a very agitated policeman on a motorcycle. The policeman was urgently motioning to us, his arms in a windmill motion, his whistle blowing – the young driver suddenly pushed the pedal down as far as he could, the car went even faster, rubber burning as we straightened out, shot down a short block, then swerved quickly around the next bend. Apparently safe, we slowed down, the smell of rubber pervading the inside of the cab.

"Que pasa?" I asked.

"Presidential motorcade. We get out of the way; they never stop and they go very fast!"

The consequences of having every 2nd leader assassinated, I surmised. Get out of the way or get run off the road. Welcome to Santo Domingo!

Hotel Palacio

I asked the driver to drop me off at the Hotel Palacio, in the middle of the Zona Colonial. I had no idea if they would have a room for me but thought that it would be my starting point.

The Zona Colonial was impressive and reminded me of streets in Spain; cobbled streets with 2 and 3 story buildings, small parks with lots of shady trees and old monuments. The Hotel Palacio fit right into the décor, except for the modern glass door which only slid open upon repeated

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thumps on the doorbell. What opened before me drew my breath. A large lobby with high ceilings, decorated with old metal chandeliers, dark mahogany stairs and ceilings framing white walls, some with hanging velvet tapestry. And old paintings of boats and explorers wearing white wigs. I had stepped back into the 1800's. A pretty Dominican lady signed me in and led me up the stairs, past a beautiful courtyard decorated with climbing ivies, to a heavy wooden door. Inside was a room, a beautiful room with heavy oak furniture, more paintings, a huge antique chandelier about 15 feet above my bed. It was like a room in a castle, like a Portuguese Pousada. Here I was, in Santo Domingo, staying in a building built in the 17th century, a building "occupied by the children of the 19th century president Buenaventura Baez"(LP). The cost? US 66/night, definitely top-end in Santo Domingo, but incredibly economical by North American standards when you consider the unique experience of staying in such a chateau. I was honestly just bowled over by this place.

Zona Colonial; El Conde / Parque Colon

I took a shower, shaved, put on some long pants, and walked out of the hotel a new man. Hotel Palacio is on a side street about 30 feet from El Conde, the pedestrian street that is the centerpiece of the Zona Colonial. It is amazingly European. The street, about a kilometre and a half long, is full of stores; clothing, shoes, music, and souvenir stores. There are banks, amusement centers, cafes, restaurants. This is the center of Santo Domingo and the most touristy and richest part of town. I strolled down El Conde to Parque Colon – I couldn't figure out why a park would be named after a piece of intestine until it hit me; "Colon" is "Columbus" in Spanish. The park was named after Christopher Columbus. Actually, Parque Colon is more a plaza than a park, a beautiful plaza with cobbled paving and shady trees in the foreground, a beautiful old church in the background. This is Catedral Primada de America, advertised as the 1st church ever built in the Americas (construction started in 1521). It is solid looking, massive, no more than 4 stories high, yet imposing with powerful columns and Romanesque arches.

I sat on the opposite side of the park, at the El Conde Restaurant, looking over the plaza and the church and could honestly not believe I was in Santo Domingo. Sitting under an umbrella-ed table outside a Paris-style restaurant/cafe sipping beer, I observed the people sitting around me. There were Spanish-looking businessmen, talking on cell phones, dressed in European short sleeve shirts and dress pants. At least one was accompanied by a beautiful, elegant woman who I imagined to be his mistress (they had a 'refreshed, after-sex' glow about them, besides which they were talking, which in itself is a good indication that they were probably not married). There were tourists; a few guys in shorts drinking beer, next to me was a young French couple with two young, blonde kids who stumbled around smiling at everyone. The young couple looked happy. I was impressed, as I always am, by young couples courageous and energetic enough to travel with young children. There were also a few black beggars and shoeshine boys sitting under a huge shady tree in the plaza. If it weren't for them I honestly would not have believed that I was not on some plaza in Spain or Portugal.

Forteleza Ozama

At the end of El Conde is one of Santo Domingo's historical highlights; the Forteleza Ozama. The fort has the distinction of being the oldest in the Americas (built between 1502-1508) and of never having been taken over by force. Situated within a huge courtyard defended by thick, high walls and gates, the fort has an intimidating, daunting air about it. The walls of the fort are 2 meters wide and almost 19 meters high at their highest level. Within the walls are smallish rooms (people were short back then) with bare cement walls, elongated narrow slits allowing light in. Steel staircases rise to rooms at higher levels or to the turrets atop the fort. The place is right out of a medieval movie. What made it all special was that I was the only person within the fort, there were no other tourists walking around the grounds of Forteleza Ozama. It was actually eerie; I kept turning around in paranoia, somehow imagining dwarf-sized Spanish soldiers sneaking up behind me. What very few people know is that Forteleza Ozama was almost attacked in 2001 by the Americans – the attack was averted when some smart guy in the CIA caught on to the spelling mistake. That's how they ended up shifting their focus to Afghanistan. Very few people know this.

I was incredibly impressed by everything that I had seen that afternoon. I just couldn't get over the history in the Zona Colonial. That and the cleanliness. Everything was immaculate. I honestly felt like I had gone back in time about 500 years.

Santo Domingo is a UNESCO World Heritage Site, classified as the first Colonial city on the continent (1498 being the official date).

Dominican racism / chicas / Ronald McDonald & the Hamburglar

I took a walk on El Conde early that evening and stopped at a small café/restaurant called Café de las Flores. This place is the place to sit and watch people in the Zona Colonial. I was again struck by the attractiveness of Dominicans. The people here come in various shades, from paler skinned descendents of the Spanish to the darker shades of the blacks they brought over from Africa. The lighter skinned you are in the Dominican Republic, the better off. It takes about 10 minutes here to realize that. Businessmen are all lighter skinned, as are women in positions of representation: receptionists in hotels, clerks in stores, waitresses in restaurants. Darker Dominicans carry out the menial jobs. Racism is ingrained; from the first days of slavery, to the days when the Haitian blacks subjugated the paler Dominicans, to the present day where poor Haitians still cross the border to work in the DR's sugarcane fields.

The women are gorgeous, in all shades, and sexiness oozes out of them. I know nobody really gives a damn, but feminists would have fits of frustration here; Dominican women enjoy displaying and attracting attention to themselves – many of the young women wear tight jeans and tight T-shirts with large colourful labels like "SEXY", "HOT STUFF", "BABY". They don't walk, they strut.

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I sat in the café and happily watched people going by. I wasn't the only one. A few other couples came and sat down at nearby tables, including a few tourists. But it was 2 men in their 40s that caught my attention; a white man with curly blond hair who looked like a blond Ronald McDonald, and his friend, a dark haired, slimy-looking moustached man (kind of looked like the Hamburglar come to think of it...). The man with the ridiculously curly hair was in charge, talking loudly, pulling up chairs at a table closest to the pedestrian street. They turned the chairs around like a bunch of guys who had just entered a strip joint and wanted to set themselves up for the best views of the stage. It didn't take long to see why; the 2 men, led by Mr. Curly, made comments or whistled at any and all the pretty girls who walked by, even venturing to invite a few teenage Dominican girls to sit with them. They might even have offered the girls Chicken McNuggets or McDonaldland cookies (and I wouldn't have been surprised if Mr. Curly mentioned his sausage quarter-pounder). They were rejected in their efforts. I watched with interest and more than a little disdain. Old perverts. Not that I'm the pope, but at least I chase girls closer to my age and I don't look like I should be wearing a red bubble nose and serving fries to a bunch of kids.

Juan Jose / nighttime Santo Domingo / Vilada

I had no plans and no real idea what I should do on a Monday night in Santo Domingo. I decided to call Juan Jose, the salesman I had met on the bus.

“Hola Juan Jose! Que pasa?”

Juan Jose was happy to hear my voice and came to meet me 15 minutes later at the hotel.

“Aiii chico!! Como estas?” he greeted me.

We had a few beers at the El Conde restaurant. I wondered for the first time why Juan Jose would want to hang around with a tourist; he didn't strike me as the party kind of guy. I was on my 2nd beer while he was still sucking on his first. But he was friendly and seemed to come from a good family; he explained that his family owned a ranch in the mountains outside of Puerto Plata. “We go to disco, yes?” he asked. We agreed that's what we would do.

We were walking down El Conde when we spotted a taxi parked on a side street. Juan Jose started talking to the driver. The driver shook his head. The talking got louder, Juan Jose started waving his arms in the air, uttering loud words that sounded like death threats to my ears. The taxi driver made a surrender sign. “Okay Franko, no problema”. We got in the back of the cab.

The funny thing was that Juan Jose and the cab driver were friendly once the pricing was established, talking and laughing away. It crossed my mind that I was doing a lot of trusting – maybe they intended to drive to a quiet, dark alley where they would mug me and strip me of my wallet? Maybe they had been arguing over their share of the loot? And the laughing... Laughter that suddenly seemed so full of malice, like a Joker's laugh (besides drowning, I sometimes have nightmares about Jokers). Maybe they were planning on leaving me naked on some street corner? I was honestly getting really nervous and regretted having called Juan Jose.

We actually spent the next half hour touring the downtown of Santo Domingo, Juan Jose indicating the baseball stadium (Estadio Quisqueya) and, with a great deal of pride, pointing out

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a huge shopping complex. Huge is not the word, it was actually colossal; a colossal, ultra-modern, brightly lit multiplex with all the famous American chains and a huge cinema complex. “Aiii Franko, you like el Republico Dominicano? You like?”
“Si, I like Juan Jose!”

“Aiii” – can start a sentence expressing almost any emotion, from shock and surprise to ridicule and excitement. Examples; “Aiii, \$50 for cigars! Its expensive!”, “Aiii, I can’t believe you drank all that beer!”, “Aiii mamacita (sexy woman), como estas?”. “Aiii, I’ve got to go to the bathroom real bad!”

What struck me, and this was true of most of urban Santo Domingo, was how this mega-complex was situated across the street from old, run down stores. I had expected Santo Domingo to be 3rd worldish, I had never expected to see the wealth that I was seeing. Funny thing is that the two co-exist, side-by-side, block-by-block. There are pockets, like this complex, which were beyond what I had seen even in Canada. Then, right besides it, is the poverty that a tourist would expect from the Dominican Republic. It was puzzling.

Having finished the tour, we crossed a large bridge overlooking the Ozama River, catching glimpses of old buildings in the Zona Colonial. We entered an area not even shown on my Lonely Planet map (actually, Lonely Planet does not recommend going anywhere outside the Zona Colonial at night, not so much because of violence directed towards tourists, more so because of “Violence directed at the cars of “rich” people”). In any case, I was in Juan Jose’s hands. I figured that I wouldn’t have gotten the benefit of the tour if his sole intention was to mug me somewhere.

We drove around on large boulevards and it was clear that Juan Jose and the driver were looking for a disco that looked open. After a few misses we came up to a place that Juan Jose announced as “Una buena discothequa” called “Mama’s”.

It didn’t look great from the outside. Or from the inside. It was dead. We walked in, sat at a table close to the bar, a bar that was brightly lit (the place had just opened). A large woman, “Mama” was behind the bar stocking beer into a fridge and cleaning glasses. Merengue music was playing. Mama came over, we ordered Cuba libres, and sat looking at the emptiness of the club. “Franko, you like Santo Domingo? You like el Republico Dominicano?”
“Si, I like Juan Jose”.

As we were talking, a beautiful girl skipped into the bar. She wore a sexy little top and a sexy, very short, skirt. She was very pretty, looked a bit like Jennifer Lopez; at least to my eyes. And she was feisty; she started a mock fight with another girl, the two jostling each other around and laughing. She obviously worked at the bar.

We ordered a couple more drinks from the older lady at the bar. Except this time the pretty girl brought it to our table. Juan Jose started talking to her, introduced me, and invited her to sit down. She did; she got herself a drink and sat between Juan Jose and I. Her name was Vilada. She had a beautiful smile and a friendly outgoing nature, with sparkling, naughty eyes. But too young. Early 20s I figured. I couldn’t help but be smitten by her though.

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“Franko, dance with Vilada”. I was a bit shy but Juan Jose egged me on and Vilada took my hand. I led her up to the dance floor and twirled her around as I had learned in dance class. Vilada started laughing, tears in her eyes “Aiii, ES LOCO!!” Juan Jose, 20 feet away was laughing as well “Ha, Ha Franko!!” Hmm, I was honestly a little hurt by all the hoopla but continued on, expertly executing the twists and turns. We finally finished the dance, Vilada laughing and feigning dizziness, Juan Jose clapping as we came back to the table. “Franko, I show you how we dance in el Republico Dominicano!” He took Vilada to the dance floor and started gyrating, the two very close – basically a slow dance with hip movement, broken by the occasional slow turn. It actually looked really hot. It reminded me of a poster that I had seen in Montreal, a poster promoting a dance movie called “Dance Lascive” in French. I don’t know what “Lascive” means, but the word alone conjures up images of hot, steamy sex. Anyway, it wasn’t anything like dance class.

Juan Jose came back and sat down, not looking at all hot and bothered. We lost Vilada who served drinks and at one point sat down with some other people. We finished our drinks when she reappeared and sat down between us.

“Franco, tomorrow we go to Boca Chica, a la playa. Si? Vilada is going to come with us”.

“Sure, no problem Juan Jose”. Cool. Beach with my new found friend and a hot, beautiful chica! Aiii!!

What a cool first day in Santo Domingo!

Going to Boca Chica / Dominican transport

At the end of El Conde is busy Parque Independencia. There was a bustling market, the park also seemed to be the hub of minivan publicos. Juan Jose led the way to a small side street where several unmarked minivans were parked; “Franko, you no spend mucho money. In Santo Domingo I show you cheap way”. We climbed into a minivan, sitting ourselves in the back row. There were several other people already in the van; a couple of old ladies, a middle aged man, a pretty younger woman with an infant in her arms. We all sat there, sweating, waiting in the van.

We started up 5 minutes later. I was amazed by the amount of activity in the streets of Santo Domingo; the traffic on the roads, the people swirling on the sidewalks. The majority of buildings outside the Zona Colonial are older, non-descript buildings, most under 5 stories high. Also everywhere are signs; large billboards erected on rooftops, advertising plastered on the side of edifices, signs hanging outside stores, restaurants, and discos. Large signs everywhere screaming for attention (I noticed that Dominicans LIKE loudness; loud music, loud clothing, loud signs. ‘Understated’ doesn’t exist here). I pointed out a huge billboard of Sammy Sosa to Juan Jose, a billboard dwarfing all the others; Sammy looking down on Santo Domingo, a benevolent smile on his face.

“Si, Sammy Sosa!! El rey del beisbol !!” (“The king of baseball”).

We crossed the bridge that we had traversed the night before, entering the eastern part of the city. Juan Jose was loudly announcing our intentions to the other people in the van. “I take mi amigo from Canada to Boca Chica. A la Playa. Vamos a ver las chicas!!” (“To the beach, to see the

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chicas”) The older women in front of us were laughing at Juan Jose, one of them turned around and asked me something that I didn’t understand. “Montreal” Juan Jose replied for me, “Franko de Montreal!!” The lady smiled, a large smile with a missing tooth, she had a cousin in Toronto.

Juan Jose showed me something he had been given when we had been walking through the park, a card with pictures of women on it. “What is it?” I asked. “It’s to meet girls on the telephone,” replied Juan Jose laughing, “Las chicas!” The young lady with the child, who had been quiet to that point, laughed and made a comment which got a big laugh out of Juan Jose. It made me wonder why someone would need “dating” services in the Dominican Republic, communication seemed so easy. I reflected on the typical subway ride in Montreal; a jam-packed car, hundreds of people sharing a tight space. Yet you can hear a pin drop. People don’t talk. Actually I remember taking a subway ride which made me reflect on precisely that. There had been a little boy, about 2 years old. Upon leaving the subway he had turned around and, with a big smile on his face, had started waving back at our subway car, saying “Bye, bye”, his little mittened hand waving. Nobody waived back. I had suddenly felt sad for the kid. Next time he probably wouldn’t wave. He would assimilate and end up another silent person among the masses. It made me think about how we end up getting socialized by our cultures.

What a nice ride; 10 minutes and everyone had joined into the conversation, everyone was smiling and laughing. It was almost with regret that Juan Jose announced that we had arrived at Mama’s disco. We got out, saying our good-byes, and walked across the street to pick up Vilada.

Ten minutes later we were in a taxi, Vilada sitting in the back with me, Juan Jose in the front talking in loud conversation with the driver, loud merengue music blaring, the singer screaming out over a frenetic dance beat. The louder and more frenetic the beat, the faster the taxi screamed around corners, horn beeping, brakes squealing, Vilada careening against me in the back seat. “AIII FRANKO, YOU LIKE DOMINICAN REPUBLIC?” yelled Juan Jose from the front seat. “SI, I LIKE JUAN JOSE,” I yelled back over the music.

The taxi took us on a 10-minute ride; we were dropped off on a small side street off the main highway where two minibuses were parked. These are “Gua-Guas”, they are basically small buses, kind of like the shuttle buses used by hotels in Montreal. One of the Gua-Guas had a sign indicating its destination; “Boca Chica”.

The bus driver came in, put the key in the ignition, the sound of the motor lost among the simultaneous blast of music emanating from the bus’s stereo. We were once again a moving Latin discotheque. I once read that the stereo system on a Dominican-owned car takes priority over any mechanical parts actually necessary to the functioning of the car. Motor doesn’t start? Just make the music louder. Flat? Make the music louder. The driver doesn’t even ask the occupants if the music is too loud. I think anyone who complained would be looked at incredulously and asked to leave the bus.

The music blaring, Vilada shook off the cobwebs and came to life; laughing, talking in an animated fashion, even flirtatiously singing to me when one of her favourite songs came on. She sat there next to me, tapping her feet on the floor, her palms on her thighs, singing, her head dancing from side to side “Es amor, es amor, es un obsession...”, looking at me with those dark, playful eyes. Juan Jose laughed at her singing. That’s how the half hour on the highway from

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Santo Domingo to Boca Chica was spent. We passed the airport, I craned my neck and saw some beautiful coastline. The water in the south looked a lot more Caribbean than what I had seen on the north coast; white sand, palm trees, and green, peaceful water.

Boca Chica

We arrived in Boca Chica. Lonely Planet hadn't been too high on the place. The Coral Hamaca Beach Hotel & Casino has supposedly taken over Boca Chica beach, making a large part of the beach private, cutting it off from the rest of the shoreline with a wall and guards. We walked down a street with a few little restaurants and souvenir shops, then walked in white sand among palm trees; "Playa Boca Chica. Es bonita Franko?" asked Juan Jose. It was beautiful; the wide beaches were white, the water green and inviting.

We took over one of the tables, the restaurant owner coming over to greet us. We ordered grilled fish for lunch. Some old men with musical instruments came by and sang for us. Vilada got close, put her hand on my arm, and gave me a couple of kisses on the cheek at Juan Jose's prompting. She stayed close after, our shoulders rubbing. I liked the feeling but felt a bit uncomfortable – she was just TOO young for me – and told Juan Jose that I wanted pictures of him and Vilada. We switched seats.

We had a great time drinking beer and smoking some cigars that Juan Jose had brought. Juan Jose and I swam out and, with an unobstructed view of the entire beach, he pointed out the sights of Boca Chica. At one point I took Vilada, who seemed to have an aversion to water, onto my shoulders and ceremoniously dumped her, screaming, in the water.

The Dominican Republic, especially Boca Chica, is nowhere close to being as cheap as Thailand. Our afternoon of fish and beer came out to about \$70 US. I paid; I was the rich tourist and I never expected Juan Jose or Vilada to contribute. Without Juan Jose I never would have had such an enjoyable day. Vilada had been refreshing and it wouldn't have been half the fun without her.

Walking back towards the Gua-Gua stop, I felt a hand slide in mine. I looked and was relieved to see it wasn't Juan Jose's. Vilada smiled at me. I thought it was sweet. I felt a little uncomfortable but held on to her hand. The Gua-gua arrived almost immediately. We climbed in, along with a busload of Dominicans – it was around 6 and the working shift in the Boca Chica resorts had changed, employees were heading back to Santo Domingo. We sat in the crowded bus, tired, Vilada next to me. She fell asleep within 2 minutes, her head on my shoulder, her hand twisted around my elbow. Juan Jose, sitting across from us, also fell asleep, his head knocking backwards against the headrest, his mouth open. I was the only one awake, tired but surprisingly alert.

We had to change gua-guas halfway between Boca Chica and Santo Domingo. Vilada fell back to sleep within minutes of the switch. Juan Jose was awake; I laughed watching him giving a girl the eye, his eyebrows fluttering. I loved watching the interaction among Dominicans on the bus. A young, pretty woman, dressed like a professional, came on, "Buenas tardes," she said climbing up the stairs. Another lady came on soon later, with the same greeting, directed at nobody in

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particular. Anybody getting on the subway or bus in Montreal and saying “Good afternoon” would be treated like a quack and probably kicked off by the driver. How refreshing and quaint was that? I loved it.

Back to Santo Domingo / Eduardo & the Virgin Mary

There was a lot more traffic coming back than there had been that morning. Finally back within the limits of Santo Domingo, we got out of the Gua Gua. We waited on the sidewalk of a large boulevard, watching the traffic, looking for what I have no idea. 3 lanes of traffic, buses and cars squished against each other, all seemingly toot-tooting and honk-honking. A car pulled over, Juan Jose spoke to the driver and we got in, the 3 of us cramming into the back seat, chatter suddenly breaking out among all on board.

A few minutes later we pulled up to Mamas. We said our good-byes to Vilada, I mentioned that I would be touring around the Zona Colonial the next day. Would she like to be my tour guide? She smiled and said “yes”. I said I would call her the next day to arrange everything.

Juan Jose and I got into another unidentified taxi. We drove a while through heavy traffic, the driver with loud music on (I still remember a song playing on the radio; “...Bachataaa..HITS!! Bachataaa..HITS!!..”) before being dropped off 10 minutes later on another street. Once again we looked for ongoing transport. Suddenly a honk; Juan Jose made a happy yelp “It’s my friend Eduardo!”

Eduardo was a good-looking guy, looked like an athlete (kind of looked like Moises Alou in fact). In his car, Juan Jose mentioned that they were childhood friends – they had met in primary school. Inspired, I told Eduardo that Juan Jose and I were planning to go out to a discotheque the next evening, would he like to come? “I can’t go. I’m Catholic,” he quickly responded. I was about to reply but thought twice. I had noticed the bible sitting next to me in the back seat but had made no big deal of it. Actually, I should have also realized that there was no loud music in the car – instead there was the loud sermonizing of a preacher, a veritable Latin Jesse Jackson (“..RENEGACION DE LOS PLACERES DE LA CARNE !!...ABSOLUCION PARA NUESTROS PECADOS!! ..SALVACION!!”). But I was taken aback by Eduardo’s quick and huffy retort. All I had done was invite him along. It made me remember private school when I was a kid. I would get in countless fights because other children ridiculed my lack of faith. I would respond by questioning the Virgin Mary’s virginity – “How can she be a virgin if she’s Jesus’ mom?” Even at 12 it didn’t make sense. Calling her “Mary with the Cherry” seemed to piss off the religious kids as well, especially the two stupid Taylor twins who I shared a dorm with. Besides talking about God all the time, the two would pee in their beds every night. I would wake up each morning to the smell of urine-soaked sheets. Anyway, show me someone who talks about God all the time or walks around with his bible, I’ll show you a humourless, intolerant person who most likely pees his bed.

Eduardo and Juan Jose dropped me off in front of the hotel. I repeatedly thanked Juan Jose. It had been a great day. I told him to give me a call and to let me know Vilada’s telephone number. He had told me that he had left it at home. He said he would.

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I was bushed. I went back to my room, took a shower, got in pajamas and watched a playoff basketball game between the Los Angeles Lakers and San Antonio Spurs before falling asleep. Have to admit that I fell asleep with a smile on my face and Vilada in my thoughts...not impure shag-the-carpeting kind of thoughts, just warm thoughts of how nice it was to have a pretty girl holding your hand and sleeping on your shoulder.

Santo Domingo clinic

I had some administrative things to do that day, the most important being to find myself a clinic. I had some stitches that I had to get taken out; a week before my trip I had gotten whacked above the eye with a hockey stick. I had bled like a stuck pig and had gone for stitches – the gash was so close to my eye that the doctor hadn't risked giving me anaesthesia, he had stitched me up cold. He hadn't stopped telling me how lucky I was, I had been very close to losing my eye. He also told me that I would have to have the stitches taken out a week later, which just happened to coincide with my vacation. That's why I had to find myself a clinic.

After asking a few people where was the best place to go, I found Clinica Abruel on Calle Independencia, about a kilometre west of the Zona Colonial. I stepped through the main doors. It actually reminded me of a Canadian clinic; it was clean and modern and there were a lot of people sitting around waiting. I got in line at the reception and waited for my turn. The lady at the reception was a pleasant-faced lady in her 40s. I didn't know how to explain that I had stitches so I just pointed at my injury and made my best scissor imitation to demonstrate what I needed to have done, all the while blathering on in English about the regularity of my bowel movements, emphasizing that I had in fact not seen any signs of blood or other untoward items in my stools. As I expected, the lady smiled, asked me to sit down, and went in to see a doctor. She came out a minute later and said "Cinco minutos" (five minutes), indicating 5 with her hand.

I sat there, watching the comings and goings in the clinic; ordinary Dominicans coming in for various ailments. I don't know if this was a private clinic, but the neatness of the average Dominican impressed me. People may not have much, but they take care to dress well, even if only to go to the clinic. I was impressed once again by the attractiveness of the people.

Every once in a while the lady would look up, smile at me and indicate 5 minutes. I would smile back and tell her that I could feel diarrhoea coming on, but that it could wait a little longer. She would smile back sympathetically and again indicate 5 minutes with her hand. Anyway, it ended up taking about 30 minutes before she came over and led me into the doctor's office.

The procedure took about 3 minutes. Finished, the doctor wished me a nice vacation. I left, thanked the pleasant round-faced lady and walked out of the door feeling pretty pleased with my morning. It's always nice proving to yourself that you can get around and get something essential done in a foreign city while speaking a foreign language and meeting nice people in the process. I felt a sense of achievement.

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I went back to the hotel, checked with reception for messages but Juan Jose hadn't called. He had said that he would call with Vilada's number. I found his silence a bit strange. I decided that I would tour the Zona Colonial by myself.

Zona Colonial highlights (and the bitchy woman)

My first stop was the Museo Alcazar de Colon. This place is a highlight of any tour of Santo Domingo. It can best be described as a palace, a palace built in the early 1500s and used as a residence by Christopher Columbus's son Diego and his wife. Getting there I noticed the ticket office off to the side of the building. For some reason I decided to ignore it and just sneak a peek inside the Museum doors. There was a group making its way in – hmm, I decided that a tour would be useful, so I followed the group in past the guard at the door. It was only upon entry that I noticed that everyone in the group was middle-aged. I wasn't the only one to notice, there was a sour-faced woman following the group around to ensure that museum pieces weren't stolen or vandalized. She spotted me about 10 minutes into the tour. I knew that she knew. I gave her my most charming smile, the boyish smile most women can't resist, the one that says "Hey, how's it going? You know and I know that I shouldn't be here, but that's okay, right?" That's when I got kicked out of the Museum, the lady telling me to go buy a ticket if I wanted to come back in. I gave her my other smile, the "Sorry-I-was-confused" smile but she didn't buy that either, fixing me with a cold stare. Honestly the only unfriendly Dominican I was to meet on this trip.

I walked out, got myself a ticket and sauntered back in looking as happy as I could, giving the lady my friendliest smile as I handed her the ticket. Bitch. But it was worth the entrance fee. The museum/palace is a beautiful, low-level building with large airy rooms, open windows and a huge balcony giving commanding views over the river and the old city. There was wonderfully old antique furniture, beautifully embroidered tapestries, old paintings, and mounted metal armour (the ones that always come to life in episodes of Scooby Doo). It was wonderful and I would have felt like I was stepping back in time had it not been for the lady suspiciously following me around the museum – actually, it crossed my mind that the museum experience would be so much more special if the lady were made to wear a suit of armour. Can you imagine how cool it would be for kids to have a suit of armour following them around, cling-clanging behind them down the passages and up the stairs? I know if I were her boss that's what she would be wearing.

In front of the Museo Alcazar de Colon is the Plaza de la Hispanidad, a large and beautiful plaza. Across this plaza are a handful of outdoor cafes and restaurants. I sat there and replenished myself on some essential nutrients (beer if you haven't figured that out already).

The Museo de las Casas Reales (a 5 minute walk away) is the best museum in the country, showing off old weaponry, parts of and models of old ships, as well as a huge map detailing Christopher Columbus's travels in the Caribbean. Sir Francis Drake, an English pirate working under the name of the English monarchy, is vilified here for the 1586 invasion of Santo Domingo during which he and an armada of 23 vessels held the city hostage. For a month they blockaded and controlled the city, destroying a block of the city each day that the Spanish authorities didn't pay the demanded ransom. They finally sailed away when the citizens gave up all their

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valuables, but not before having ransacked, looted, and burned down much of Santo Domingo. Suffice to say that Drake was voted as Santo Domingo's 1586 Shithead of the year.

The next stop was the Panteon Nacional. It's an impressive, fortress-like building with a large brightly lit hall. This place was restored by dictator Rafael Trujillo and serves as a resting place for some of the Dominican Republic's most important people. I walked in to be accosted by a very officially dressed Dominican man, a plastic name tag on his shirt. He showed me around (as if I had a choice), bringing me to a corner where two walls stood decorated by marble plaques. Behind the plaques lay the famous bodies. The man went into a spiel about the Panteon, introduced some of the dead people behind the marble plaques, cut away to remark that "Canadian women are very beautiful", then continued on with his spiel. The whole 'tour' took about 10 minutes. There wasn't anything to see – I figured that I would see some dead bodies or at least some pictures of these famous people. No such luck. It was a rip-off. The 'guide' asked for a tip, gave a pained look when I gave him a tip, made a pleased smile when I added to the tip. I walked out feeling like the limping schmuck who had picked up the soap in the shower.

I continued on through the Zona Colonial, saw some ruins, passed a few churches, sat in a small, quiet park. It wasn't just the monuments, forts, or churches that made the area so special; it was the whole feeling of the area; the small hilly streets, the sidewalks with stairs, the small parks with shady benches. There was an old, European feel to the Zona Colonial. I would have preferred getting shown around by Vilada, but even solo I enjoyed my afternoon.

Nighttime Santo Domingo – bars, shoeshine boys & crappucinnos

I showered and was changing when the phone rang;

"Hola Franko!"

Juan Jose agreed to meet me at Café Floras. I asked him if he had spoken to Vilada but he hadn't, he had been "too busy". I suggested that he invite her to come out with us that night, she would be fun at a disco. He said he would give her a call.

I was still sitting at Café Floras when Juan Jose showed up. He was alone, no sign of Vilada. Somehow that didn't surprise me. It flashed across my mind that maybe he had fallen in love with her and that he wanted to keep her for himself. Which honestly was fine, I was just a tourist passing through. I wasn't even going to mention her name; "Hola Juan Jose!"

"Hola Chico!"

On the agenda was Guacara Taina, the famous disco-in-a cave. But that was for later. Juan Jose had another bar to start the evening off with.

We walked to Parque Independencia and took the same publico that we had taken the previous day. The difference was that it was night time, the whole street was dark, black even. I felt conspicuous. I had a few Dominican women give me long looks.

"Juan Jose, why do chicas here stare?"

"Because you are a foreigner and they think you have money".

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Okay, so it wasn't for my good looks or sparkling intellect. In any case, I was glad to have Juan Jose there with me. I suddenly stuck out like a zit on a supermodel.

The first stop was a bar that Juan Jose was familiar with. We walked into a lounge, a very modern, fancy place with blue neon lights everywhere. There were TV sets and a basketball game silently playing. There weren't many people. There were some pretty girls though, hostesses it seemed. We sat ourselves down at the bar. A pretty, sexily dressed girl came, smiled, and took our orders. She came back a few minutes later with a couple of drinks. As we sat there, she parked herself a few feet away, across the bar from Juan Jose. A few minutes later another girl came, she also sat a few feet away from us, this one closer to me. There was no avoiding a conversation. We talked, Juan Jose and I had a couple of drinks while the girls were sipping away at a couple of cocktails. Juan Jose suggested we go dance, so we both grabbed a girl and took them to the dance floor. I remembered to go slow but in actual fact didn't much like my dance partner – the girl had really bad smelling armpits. I avoided turning her, her armpits smelled so bad. This girl made cheese smell good.

We didn't stay too long. I asked for the bill and hid my shock at the tab. 600 Pesos, about \$35 US! We walked out, Juan Jose asking me how much it had cost, reacting in shock, then profusely apologizing “Lo siento Franko, I didn't know”. He said they had changed ownership since the last time he had been there. We calculated that we had paid for our drinks, the girl's drinks (which I had neither ordered or offered), and a fee for our time with them. “No problema Juan Jose, I'm on vacation and it was fun. We will know next time”.

We walked down the street. We were in Juan Jose's neighbourhood and he pointed out a few bars...but it wasn't a very nice neighbourhood; there were a lot of vacant lots between buildings and the blocks were long and dark. I even saw a huge rat scamper away into some shrubs. “Are you hungry Franko? I have a friend who owns a restaurant”.

His friend's “Restaurant” was more of a kitchen with a counter facing out onto the street. Juan Jose introduced me, asked me if I liked scallops. “Sit down Franco, I bring you”. I sat down a few feet away at a plastic table on the sidewalk while Juan Jose was getting the food.

I had noticed kids carrying shoeshine boxes everywhere in Santo Domingo. You see them on El Conde, young kids carrying these wooden boxes. Sammy Sosa, so the story goes, was a poor shoeshine boy when he was young. As I was sitting there, these two kids came by, one probably around 12, his younger brother around 9 or 10. It was 11:30 at night. “Mister, you like your shoes shined?”

“How much?”

“10 pesos”

The older boy started shining my shoes, his younger brother crouching next to him, two little black kids with smiles on their faces. I was standing up; “Other foot,” the boy would tell me every once in a while. I tried my Spanish on them and the younger one laughed, “Your Spanish is very funny”.

“I'm sure my Spanish is better than your English,” I told him. Smart guy had no response to that one. You have to love kids, anyone who doesn't love kids probably kicks dogs and puts cats in microwaves. Kids are, deep down, the same all over the world. These two kids were dressed in

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rags and shining shoes in the middle of the night. But they were happy and talkative and looked up at me with that sparkling mischievousness in their eyes.

Juan Jose came by with the food, saw me getting a shoeshine, asked me how much I was paying “10 pesos! Aiii! You just give him 5 pesos,” exclaimed Juan Jose.
“No, no, I said I give him 10 pesos”. The little boy smiled with relief.

The boy finished and I gave him his pesos. He and his brother waved their good-byes and walked off in the dark. Eating, I remembered I didn’t like scallops.

“Franko, you like Dominican food?”

“Si, I like Juan Jose”.

“You like more? I can get more!”

“No thank you, I’m getting full”.

As I was sitting there, force-feeding myself scallops, the boy and his brother passed by, crossing the road, shyly looking over to me;

“THANK YOU MISTER!” said the older one.

In English! How adorable was that? Maybe my 10 pesos had made their day – all I know was that they had made mine with those 3 words. I felt like the Grinch when his heart expanded (you know, when he heard all the little Whos in Whoville singing carols after he had stolen their Christmas presents). Those 3 words inspired me to finish off my fried scallops.

Juan Jose and I were walking down the street, looking for transport, when he suddenly whistled; “Its my cousin Armando!” he explained. Armando had a shiny new minivan decked out in yellow and black New York City taxi colors. We jumped in his taxi, the two cousins breaking out in gibberish of talk and laughter. Armando was interested in me, asking me the usual questions; “Do you like the Dominican Republic?” “Is it your first time here?” etc, etc, before going on to more detailed questions “Do you like Dominican women? Dominican women are beautiful, don’t you think?” I confirmed that I did indeed find Dominican women beautiful. This was met with huge acclamations of approval from both Juan Jose and Armando. “Franko, we go to place where there are sexy women. Have a couple of beers, si?” I had no problems with that.

The bar/restaurant was called “Eagle Fast Food” and was unlike anything I had ever seen before. A mix of Hooters and a drive-in cinema. It was a large outdoor bar with a huge screen showing a basketball game. The highlight were the girls however – girls wearing tight, white spandex shorts and tops. Juan Jose and I sat there, drank a few beers, and surveyed the action (again I was the lone white guy). Before leaving I went to the washroom for a quick slash. I was doing my business when I heard a voice; “Hola amigo, you like your stay in the Dominican Republic?” I don’t usually talk to a guy addressing me at the urinal (I have a strict rule against talking to any guy when there are penises sticking out) but I did in this case, confirming that I was indeed enjoying my stay in the Dominican Republic. Dominicans, I was discovering, were so concerned that I should be having a good time. They needed to have it confirmed. I sensed that there was a lot of pride involved. I didn’t want to find out the reaction if I answered negatively “No, I’m having a lousy time in this hellhole and the people are pricks”. I have the feeling the response would be decidedly unfortunate for me.

Armando came to pick us up outside the bar – next stop was Guacara Taina. This place is mentioned in Lonely Planet: “By far the most unique place to hear live merengue or salsa is in

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this giant club, located entirely inside a bat cave. It's so big it can hold more than 2000 people." We walked to the entrance of the club, paid US 10 cover charge (each), then walked down several flights of stairs, rock walls on either side, descending into the depths of the cave.

The location is spectacular. The cave is huge, the air has a certain under-the-ground humidity which is cool and pleasant. The disco is built on various levels within the cave, a huge bar lines one wall, stalactites hanging down meters above. It was fabulous. And empty. There were only 4 other people in the bar. Juan Jose and I sat alone drinking Cuba Libres like a bunch of losers. It was dead.

Sometime during our stay I felt a great need to go to the bathroom. It must have been the scallops. That's the great thing about an empty club, I knew there would be no one else in the bathroom. I found the passageway, working my way down through the depths of the cave. I arrived at a door indicating the men's bathroom, walked in, already detaching my belt buckle...to see a man occupying a stool. He stood up at attention and gave me a big smile. An attendant. Damn! There was no way I could take a dump, the washroom was quiet and small, and, no matter what, this guy would be sitting on a stool 10 feet away. Who's bright idea was that? I couldn't take a crap. I headed to the urinal, feeling the his eyes on my back. I seized up – I can't pee knowing I'm getting stared at. I resigned myself to the fact that it was a lost cause. I zipped up, pretended I had taken my leak, got to the sink where I would have turned the faucet on – except that the washroom attendant got there first, smiling, and turning it on for me. Then, smiling all the while, he gave me a towel to dry my hands. I gave him a tip. I left the bathroom totally frustrated. I can just imagine this guy getting home, probably laughing all the way, and recounting the story to his family "...and there was this white guy, ha ha, hee hee, who walked in, his pants practically at his knees, AND you should have seen the look on his face when he realized that he couldn't take a shit in peace, ha ha, hee hee..." Memo to me: if I ever come here again make sure to download beforehand.

Travel tip: "Crappucinno". Definition: "The particularly frothy type of diarrhea that you get when abroad". Tell a fellow traveler that you "have to go for a crappucinno", it will automatically discern you from the unknowledgeable, inexperienced traveler and you will no doubt be treated with equal doses of respect and sympathy.

Armando came to pick us up. Juan Jose; "Franko, what do you want to do? Do you want to go to Mamas, see the chica?" Vilada, I hadn't forgotten about her but had resigned myself to not seeing her again.

"Okay Juan Jose, we go to Mamas!"

Mamas was a long way away and we drove on some of Santo Domingo's major auto routes, going over long, raised overpasses. I was again taken aback; the state of the roads in Santo Domingo are as modern, and in better condition, then they are in Montreal (mind you, they don't have -30C conditions). We drove on, the music loud (not even worth mentioning, it's always loud), Juan Jose and Armando giggling in the front: "Franko, when you see girls, what do you say?"

"What do you mean? When?"

"In a bar. What do you say?"

"Hola, como estas?"

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“No, No Franko. Repetir after me okay? Vamos a Rappal!”

“Vamos a Rap-all”

They were pissing themselves laughing, “No, no Franko. Vamos a Rappal. You meet girl, you say that. They will like you”.

“Vamos a Rappal”. It’s not in any English-Spanish dictionary. I found out later it means, “Let’s go fuck”.

I saw something else that made my eyeballs bulge. We were stopped at a red light on a major boulevard. “Look Franko,” said Juan Jose. In front of us, on the other side of the intersection, was a HUGE Heineken billboard showing double-fridge doors. Suddenly, as we were waiting there, the fridge doors opened outwards, cold vapour coming out of the doors. Both doors were open, and inside, discernable among the billowing mist, were rows upon rows of Heineken bottles, droplets of moisture dripping down, the bottles glistening with the promise of cool satisfaction, contentment, and the slight possibility of drunken sex. Wow, I had to pinch myself to make sure that we hadn’t crashed and gone to beer heaven.

We made our way back to an area I recognized – we were suddenly right in front of Mama’s. And there was Vilada, outside talking to a bunch of people. She looked surprised and happy to see us, she came over, gave us a kiss on the cheek and explained that Mama’s was dead. Juan Jose looked at me;

“Lets go somewhere else Franko”.

“Okay”. I turned to Vilada “Come with us, we’re going to go dance”.

Vilada looked uncertain, was about to get in the van, then changed her mind. She said something to Juan Jose. Then took him aside, behind the van. Something was going on.

Juan Jose came back, looking serious. Vilada walked away, a little further away with her friends.

“Franko” Juan Jose started, looking serious, “Listen. Vilada says she will come, but it’s going to cost 600 pesos for you to sleep with her”.

I couldn’t believe it. We had spent the previous day together at the beach. Now she wanted 600 pesos (\$35) for me to screw her? I was insulted.

“Franko, do you want? Or we go?”

“Vamos! Lets go!”

Armando took off with a squeal of rubber. I looked out of the minivan, seeing Vilada turning her head to see us speed away. It was the last time I would see her. I think we were all upset.

Armando: “Putal!” (“Slut”), Juan Jose: “She mentioned money yesterday at the beach. That’s why I didn’t call her or give you her number”. I was upset but mostly hurt and humiliated – of course it wouldn’t have been very cool to act hurt in front of a bunch of guys, especially Latin guys; “What, she wanted me to pay her for sex? She should be paying me. She should be paying me by the inch. No, she should be paying me by the pound. Then she’d be broke. She’d have a limp and she’d be broke!” Ok, that was all hot air – the truth was that I was hurting inside.

We stayed out another hour before calling it a night. Armando came to pick us up, we drove back to the Zona Colonial and I told Juan Jose that I would be leaving the next day. He was a bit disappointed. I thanked him again. I had seen and done things in Santo Domingo that I had never imagined. I had learned a lot having Juan Jose as a guide.

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I barely slept; the whole episode with Vilada was heavy on my heart. I had enjoyed her company, much as I had Juan Jose's. It made me question my "friendship" with Juan Jose. Why was he so accommodating? Yes, I paid his way. But apart from that he had been a free and fun tour guide. Had Vilada and Juan Jose tried to get as much out of me as they could, in their own way? Being used is something that happens as a tourist, especially in poorer countries; you as the tourist have money, they don't. They, on the other hand – if they have good intentions – have the potential to make a good trip great. Meeting a friendly local can be the most interesting and genuine way to see a country. It might even save you money. It can be a mutually beneficial relationship – but it can also lead to abuse, scams, or even dangerous situations if you befriend the wrong people. It can be a fine line between being taken advantage of and being mutually beneficial – but I felt that I had gotten as much out of Juan Jose as he had gotten out of me. He had made my trip to Santo Domingo a memorable experience. Vilada on the other hand had abused; she had gone to Boca Chica with us and flirted for the sole purpose of extracting money from me at the end. I think that sucked (for lack of a better word).

Going back to Caberate / the truth about all-inclusive food

Getting around the DR was already starting to be routine – I went to Santo Domingo's large bus terminal at 8 the next morning, got myself a ticket to Sosua, then sat down in the lobby, sitting among about a hundred Dominicans watching news on a single TV set. Thirty minutes later I was on the bus, leaving Santo Domingo in much the same shape that I had arrived (ie. with a hangover). I spent the next 5 hours sleeping, watching movies, and looking outside at the beautiful, lush scenery..

It was mid-afternoon by the time we arrived in Sosua. I got off the bus, hoisted my backpack, and stood on the main road looking out for a passing publico.

"Senor! Senor!" There was a middle-aged man in a nice minivan taxi beckoning to me. I went over.

"There are no publicos today. Problems in the road, no publicos"

Hmm. Wasn't sure if I believed him "How much for the taxi to Cabarete?"

"700 pesos"

What?! 700 pesos! About \$40! For 10 miles to Cabarete! No way. I gave him a look of disgust, said "No Gracias" and went back to the road.

There were a bunch of young men on motoconchos off to the side of the road. One of them asked me if I wanted to go to Cabarete on the back of his motorcycle. Looked at the small motorcycle, then at my full backpack and decided against it. I had heard about motorcycle accidents in the DR and it was the last thing I needed...I could just see the headline; "Idiot tourist in critical condition after falling backwards off motorcycle".

There was no choice. I walked back to the taxi, said "Okay", and dumped my bag in the back.

The taxi driver was actually very nice. I told him how much I had enjoyed Santo Domingo and how hospitable I found Dominicans. "Dominican people are good people," said the driver, "People here are not dangerous. Many tourists are afraid here, they stay in all-inclusive resorts and don't come out". "But you know what they get?" he said, pointing out an all-inclusive resort

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that we were passing, “They get turista! They get diarrhoea! They vomit! Food in those hotels no good. They are prepared many hours before, the food sits around all day, gets heated up. Dominicans would not eat that!” I laughed. It was true, I had not gotten sick on this trip. What he said made sense.

Back to Cabarete

We arrived at the Caribe Surf Hotel. I took out my wallet, pulling out wads of bills to hand over.

“No, No, 170 pesos!” said the man.

“I thought you said 700”.

“No, I said 170”.

I apologized “I still have problems with numbers in Spanish”.

He left with a smile. He could easily have left with my 700 pesos but he had been honest.

“Hola amigo!” Rapheal greeted me. He was happy to see me and I told him all about my adventures in Santo Domingo. I got my old room back. It almost felt like home.

I spent the afternoon walking down the beach. Again the wind was blowing, large waves thumping onto the beach . I jumped in and rode the waves, getting knocked over a couple of times in the process.

Nicely relaxed from the beach, I showered and sat on my balcony watching the sunset through the fronds of the palm trees. I was tired but I had to party; it was my last night in the tropics. After which there would be no more Dominican women, no more merengue music, no more rum, no more practicing my Spanish or listening to the sound of waves breaking on the beach. I hated thinking about it.

I went back to the German Restaurant where I had been the first night. I actually saw the British couple again and filled them in on my adventures in Santo Domingo. Then I had a great plate of Weinersnitzel. I was eating away, wondering about the origins of Weinersnitzel (the word “Weinersnitzel” always makes me think of the dog we had in Africa, a little Dashund called Fritz. Maybe because people refer to Dashunds as “Weiner dogs”. Maybe Weinersnitzel is the reason you don’t see very many Dashunds walking around? I wondered). Anyway, eating a Weinersnitzel also made me think of one of my boss Tony’s favourite little anecdotes. Tony always says “You can tell a culture’s phobias by their swear words”. He then cites the Anglo culture’s use of sex-related swear words – the Anglo culture has a phobia about sex (“Fuck”, “Cunt”, “Prick”). For the French it is religion (“Hostie” and “Tabarnac” being good examples of commonly used swear words). For the Germans, and this was news to me, many swear words are animal related. “Schweinhund” for example, one of the favourite German swear words, literally means “Pigdog”. Scratched my head wondering how Germans came up with “Pigdog” as an insult.

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It's not often that I'm deep enough to start contemplating the origin of multi-cultural swear words or Weinersnitzel. But it was a reflection of my mood that night. So I was very mellow when I walked into Las Brisas (which, as my previous few days in Cabarete confirmed, was the only happening place in town).

It was a Thursday night and the place was jumping. Lots of people, lots of pretty Dominican girls as well. But I just wanted to enjoy the show. I got myself an El Presidente and sat at a table closest to the beach; the spectacle of people on the dance floor on one side, the beach, waves, and the breeze from the ocean on the other. I was happy and content.

I would have stayed by myself in that corner all night if Cecilia hadn't come and talked to me. She was from Santo Domingo where she lived with her mother. She was in her last year of political science studies in university and proceeded to give me a course on Dominican politics, blaming the government for the poverty in the country, talking about corruption and the influence of American corporations on Dominican politics. She was very passionate and well spoken. I mentioned that I had seen a lot of money in Santo Domingo, that some people have a lot of money to invest. "Yes, there are many rich Dominicans, but the money never filters down. Many of those rich people take their money out of the country, Dominican people don't invest in the Dominican Republic. The money in Santo Domingo is mostly foreign investment". It struck me how much she seemed to love her country, Raphael had been the same when he had explained why he had come back from the United States. Cecilia vowed to one day make a difference, one of the things that made her most upset were the lack of laws protecting women and children. Dominican men, according to her, slept around, had kids with various women and were not held financially liable. She wanted to change that. I remember looking at her, the surf in the background, listening to her soft voice. It made me sad to think that she had to resort to sleeping with tourists to pay for her education. In many ways Cecilia epitomized the Dominican Republic; beautiful, passionate, friendly, and resourceful – yet at the same time poor and somehow dysfunctional.

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Last day blues

I woke up around noon feeling sluggish. Miserable actually. I went for breakfast, then spent most of the day walking. I watched the kite surfers at Playa Encuentro for about an hour. On the way back I heard female voices, “Hola! Hola!” I looked towards a bluff off to the side of the beach and saw 2 Dominican girls motioning to me. I detoured closer, guessing what they wanted. “Would you like to fuckie-fuckie?” one of them asked. “No gracias,” I smiled back.

I did some last minute shopping on the beach, buying some music CDs and some cigars (watch out, the Cuban brands like Montecristos and Cohibas are fakes – don’t buy cigars on the beach). Also got myself a couple bottles of “Brugal” rum.

It was with a heavy heart that I packed up my bag. I said goodbye to Rapheal and walked up to the main road where I hailed down a taxi.

I arrived 20 minutes later at the airport. Having checked in, I went towards the departure gate, a huge security guard blocking the way. He frowned at me, a mean looking scowl.

“Is this the departure gate?” I asked him, suddenly nervous.

“No, over there,” he said pointing, glaring at me.

I was turning to go when he suddenly started laughing “A joke! Yes, please come this way” His scowl had become a big, beaming smile. A real comedian this guy. Realized it would be the last Dominican I would probably deal with and felt sad to be leaving.

I sat in the waiting room, depressed to be back among tourists – not just tourists, but charter airline tourists, the lower dregs among travellers. I had spent the last week among Dominicans. I had barely exchanged two words with any other tourist. The whole scene made me depressed. I saw tourists who looked like they had just walked off the beach, wearing loose shirts hanging over wrinkled Bermudas, a few had not even buttoned up their shirts. Everyone in the waiting room was drinking beer and smoking. I was embarrassed by the demeanour of the people at the bar. I passed by long enough to see a man; drunk, his shirt open and chest sticking out, ordering beer from the Dominican barman in French.

“S’il vous plait, mi amigo, uno cerveza hostie”. His accent was really bad and the beer and swear word kind of rolled off his tongue as “cervezahostie”.

The bartender didn’t understand and the Quebecker made a big show of it, sticking up one finger “Uno”, doing like he was drinking “Cerveza”, then uttering “Hostie tabarnac”. It amazed me – Dominicans don’t have much, but they have manners and respect and they dress well with what they have. In many cases I can’t say the same for North Americans. I was already missing the hospitality and spirit of Dominicans. I missed the music.

That was my state of mind when we boarded the plane and flew back to Montreal. Sad and depressed. Heavy hearted. I had somehow left a piece of my heart in the Dominican Republic.

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What made the Dominican Republic special was the spirit of the people. I was already attracted to the Latin culture; the togetherness of families, the happy-go-lucky attitude to life, the caring of people towards others. You have to keep on your toes (Dominicans like to separate you from your cash), but at the same time you have to stay open because most Dominicans will open their arms to you with their hospitality and warmth. And the music. The music reflects the Dominican people; happy, romantic, sad, and always ready to party. They wear their emotions on their sleeves. As a North American I found it fulfilling and refreshing. I felt a spirit of life that I was missing. My best memories are of little things, like being with Juan Jose in a publico, everyone talking, the music blaring, horns beeping. Or getting in a stranger's car for a lift, the car full of other strangers, people talking and smiling. There is a sense of community. This is the first trip where I honestly fell in love more with the people than anything else to do with the destination.

Another thing that attracted me to the Dominican Republic, to the whole island of Hispaniola in fact, is the history. I had a hard time getting excited about the history in Thailand. It was just too foreign. Hispaniola's colonial history I could grasp. The Zona Colonial in Santo Domingo is fantastic.

I would hear from Juan Jose almost every month; "Hola Franko. Como estas? When are you coming to the Dominican Republic?"

"Soon, soon, Juan Jose".

"Good, you remember to call me when you come".

"Yes, yes, Juan Jose. I look forward to it"

"Franco – you remember what to say to the chicas, you didn't forget?"

"VAMOS A RAPPAL!!"

"Aiii!! See you soon Franko!"

Back to the Dominican Republic

The initial plan was to do an adventure tour of the entire island of Hispaniola. The idea had been conjured up on my last visit to the DR – I thought it would be a great study of the differences that make up Hispaniola; colonial history (French versus Spanish), race (black Haiti versus the Latin mix in the DR) and religion (I was particularly intrigued by voodoo in Haiti and wanted to see a ceremony). My readings and experiences on the last trip had left me with the impression that there is much dislike between Haitians and Dominicans. I had also been told that you can see the difference between the two countries just crossing the border, the lushness of the Dominican Republic turning into a barren, rocky landscape upon entering Haiti. Such differences on such a small island. I was intrigued. It would make for a great study in contrasts.

I had read everything there was to read about Haiti in Lonely Planet and I was braced for a shock to the senses. I already knew that Haiti was the poorest country in the Western Hemisphere. Port-Au-Prince was dangerous, crowded, with open sewers, beggars, and “Children washing in ditches”. I was warned to be careful just coming in from the airport, “Taxis are dangerous” according to a Haitian friend. This was not going to be a “Pleasure” trip. Weeks of thinking about it had made it a personal challenge, a test. I knew I would step out of Port-Au-Prince airport sticking out like Pamela Anderson in a Small-Breasted Afro-American Convention. Tony at work pushed me to go; “You know how the media always distorts things, it’s probably not as bad as its made out to be”. Sylvie’s father and the Philippines popped into my mind. I’d be damned if I let fear and prejudice scare me out of my plans.

I emailed the best hotel in POP, the Hotel Oloffson, asking for basic information and reservations. After a few days of silence I emailed again, to get a huffy response telling me to contact Agence Citadelle (a travel agency) if I wanted information. I did, never to receive a reply. I also emailed Voyages Lumiere (the other travel agency listed in LP). Never received a reply from them either. I emailed the best hotel in Cap Haitien, the Mont Joli Hotel. They never replied. What was going on? People usually line up to take my money. Not only couldn’t I get information on Haiti, I couldn’t make a hotel reservation or book internal flights. I held off on booking the flight deal to POP. Maybe my mom was right; “That’s a cheap airfare, maybe it’s because nobody except YOU plans a trip to Haiti”. Hmm. A day later I’m reading BBC news online and click on “Pictures of the day” to see youths hurling rocks at soldiers in Port-Au-Prince. There was a burning blockade in the background. Not good – but this is the 3rd world, setting fires to cars and stuff is a pastime, kind of like the way we suddenly get the urge to build snowmen in Canada. I was still going.

It was a taxi driver that changed my mind. It was late in the evening and I was coming back from a party. I noticed that the driver was Haitian (as are most taxi drivers in Montreal) and started telling him about my plans. He was silent. I kept talking, his silence starting to bother me. I looked up at the rear view mirror to see his eyes dart away. He finally said something; “I don’t think you should go to Haiti”. The tone however suggested something more along the line of “You are the biggest idiot that I have ever met in my life – and I’ve met a lot of idiots”. That’s when I decided – if Haitians themselves had nothing good to say about their country then it probably wasn’t worth the risk. It’s one thing to hear disparaging news in the media, its another

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to talk to natives of a country about your plans and to have them look at you like you just shit all over yourself in the backseat of their car.

That's how my Haitian plans never came to fruition. But I still had the DR in mind. I hadn't gotten over my "First" trip. There were still many places to see and nice people to meet. I suddenly forgot about Haiti.

"I want to go anywhere in the Dom Rep," I told my travel agent. She got me a deal; \$597 CDN (about \$460 US) – the only thing was that the flight was at 6 AM out of Mirabel airport and that I was flying into La Romana. La Romana? Sounds like a pasta dish.

Getting to Mirabel airport / Giuseppe and the driver

That's how I ended up making my way to Montreal's Voyageur bus station at 1 in the morning on the 9th of November. The girl at the ticketing booth had the detached, no-nonsense demeanour of someone accustomed to working these late shifts. I smiled at her and got that "What are you smiling at?" look. "Mirabel airport?" she gave me a dubious look and a shrug of the shoulders "They might come, or they might not. Sometimes the bus doesn't bother showing up. I'm telling you now because I don't want you shouting at me if it doesn't show up. It's not my fault if it doesn't come, it happens all the time and everyone blames me". "It's okay, if it doesn't come I won't shout at you" I assured her.

I sat next to the gate, no bus in sight, with about 10 other people. They were mostly typical, normal-looking tourists – mostly, except for this one old guy who decided that I would be his friend for the night. His name was Giuseppe, I know this because he had a huge carton box containing a bicycle, a bicycle constructed in the 1930s by the appearance of certain parts that had ripped through the box. And on the box, in bold print, was his name "Giuseppe Panunzio". Giuseppe came over to me and muttered something that I didn't understand.

"Yes, I hope the bus comes soon," I said, guessing.

He sat next to me and started muttering some more. He was from Ottawa and was going to the DR for 6 months, leaving his house and wife behind; "Me gotta problems with da wife, she no listen". Giuseppe was about 70, wearing loose, brown, polyester pants and a chequered, open Bermuda shirt over a tight, dirty-white undershirt from which tufts of grey chest hairs protruded. He had thick peasant fingers and a face that only a dermatologist could love – he had a large white outgrowth on his cheek (with a few little spurts of hair growing from it) that begged to be squeezed. Add to that the musty odor of someone who didn't believe in the concept of a daily change of clothing. The shoes sealed it though. Giuseppe's shoes were old with patched squares of differently coloured leather. They could pass as bowling shoes at a quick glance. Giuseppe didn't look like a man heading to the Dominican Republic. He looked like an Italian immigrant taking the boat to New York about a half a century too late.

He was informative and interesting though; he stayed in a small house with a Dominican woman in his annual trips to the DR. She was a good woman; "No complain, no bigga mouth... she cooka good". They enjoyed going to the beach and taking bike rides. "Problem in DR is peso", said Giuseppe, "Is 40 pesos to dollar, before, lessa dena 6 months ago was 20 pesos. Good for da

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tourist, buda everyding now expensive fora Dominicans, I hopa one day not make da people violent”.

Giuseppe was talking about the problems he was having with his son (“He no listen...”) when I stopped listening and looked at my watch. It was ten minutes past two and there was no sign of any bus. I excused myself and went to speak to the girl at the ticketing booth, “Excuse me, do you know what’s happening to our bus?”

“I’ll call the company. See, I told you – they never come!”

A few other people had picked up my cue and we were suddenly 5 people around this girl as she was arguing with someone on the other end of the line “...No, no bus ever showed up here...well, your bus driver is lying...everyone is around me and they all blame me because of your company’s bad service, now I’m going to have to give them all refunds...” She was on the verge of tears.

The girl looked almost thankful giving back refunds. At 2:30 in the morning there was only one other way to get to Mirabel airport – taxi.

That’s how I ended up sharing a taxi to Mirabel with Giuseppe. Two other guys had actually offered to split with me (\$60 CDN from downtown to Mirabel) but I couldn’t abandon Giuseppe and his huge box – I dragged it out on the street for him, hailed a taxi, and we, along with a big, black Haitian driver, managed to somehow squeeze the box in the back seat. Being relatively skinny, I then squeezed under the box (a pedal sticking out under my chin) while Giuseppe dumped himself in the front seat.

“Vous allez en vacances?” – the driver was asking us if we were going on vacation. I explained that the bus to the airport hadn’t shown up, that both Giuseppe and I were going to the Dominican Republic (on different planes as I would later find out). The driver didn’t speak English, Giuseppe didn’t speak a word of French. I found myself in the position of translating for the two. Which wasn’t easy between Giuseppe’s mutterings and the box weighing down heavily on my leg. I had heard about people being stuck in cramped conditions (usually when travelling) and dying suddenly from a blood clot to the brain. If I was going to die I wanted it to be from something memorable “Did you hear? Frank died eating poisonous red ants in the Congo. Wow! He was an idiot but he sure lived an exciting life”. Dying from a blot clot caused by sitting in the back of a taxi with a granny bicycle on my lap wasn’t the way I wanted to go.

Giuseppe, when passing St.Hubert street; “Many stores, howda make da money I dunno”. The driver, like most Haitians I’ve met, was serious and quiet, but also curious: “Qu’est qu’il a dit?” (“What did he say?”).

“Il se demandait comment tous ces magasins font pour faire de l’argent,” I replied (“He was wondering what all these stores do to make money”).

“Oh,” said the driver.

The driver was from Port-au-Prince and I told him the story about my planned trip to Haiti: “Oui, c’est bien que tu n’y vas pas, les choses vont mal” (“Yes, its good that you are not going, things are bad”).

Giuseppe: “Is he froma Haiti?”

“Yes” I said.

Giuseppe: “10 years I wenta Haiti”.

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“Oh,” I said, not really caring because I was trying to wiggle my leg out from under the box.

The driver: “Est-ce qu’il est allé en Haiti?” (“Did he go to Haiti?”)

“Oui, 10 ans,” I replied (“Yes, 10 years”)

The driver to Giuseppe; “You have Haitian woman?” in heavily accented English.

Giuseppe: “No”.

The driver was silent, thoughtful. We sat quietly, eyes fixed on the empty highway. It was 3 am and we were one of the few cars on the autoroute at this time of the night.

“Il n’a pas couché avec une femme Haitienne?” the driver suddenly asks me (“He never slept with a Haitian woman?”).

“Giuseppe, did you sleep with a Haitian woman?” I asked.

“No,” replied Giuseppe.

The driver was quiet again. He looked across at Giuseppe; “10 years?” and pretended to masturbate. The previously quiet Haitian laughed like this was the funniest thing on earth. “Il n’aime pas les femmes noires??” he asked me laughing (“He doesn’t like black women??”). He had a soft voice and a sweet laugh that contrasted with his muscular bulk and serious features.

Giuseppe looked confused by the big laughing Haitian. “Giuseppe, I don’t think he believes that you were 10 years in Haiti and that you never slept with a Haitian woman,” I said.

“I go to Haiti 10 years, buta only crossa da border. Only for haffa hour anda no sleep with no Haitian woman” (ie. After much back and forth, we determined that he had actually been in the DR but had crossed the border into Haiti for about half an hour. I don’t know the point of this story, but it seemed of great importance to the Haitian driver that Giuseppe never actually slept with a Haitian woman).

We arrived at Mirabel. I helped Giuseppe bring his box into the terminal and wished him a pleasant trip.

It was a good and uneventful flight (an older crowd flies to La Romana as compared to Puerto Plata) and the Air Transat L-1011 descended over flat terrain with cultivated fields, mountains seen far to the north, before landing at La Romana airport. It was a little past noon when we stepped out of the plane, the day sunny and about 30C.

I had no plans to stay in La Romana, I wanted to go to the Samana Peninsula the next day and my goal was to overnight in Boca Chica (which was convenient being only half an hour from Santo Domingo). I figured that an afternoon of beach was exactly what I needed for my first day in the DR.

I took a publico to the town of La Romana (10 minutes) and arrived just in time to take the Gua-Gua that does the trip between La Romana and Santo Domingo. I settled in for the ride, music loudly playing, the driver asking me where I was from. I was happy to be back in the DR.

Boca Chica; rain / Playboy/ the Italian guy

The weather had turned for the worse when I arrived at my destination about 2 hours later. I got out of the bus to be greeted by heavy rain and about 10 teenagers on motorcycles, all looking to take me into town. I shooed them away, put my backpack on, and walked the 10 minutes to the beach community of Boca Chica.

Boca Chica's main street reminded me somewhat of Cabarete's with its souvenir stores, Internet cafes, tour shops, and restaurants. My backpack and pale skin gave me away as the new meat in town, a few Dominicans hanging around on the street turned their heads my way as I walked down the main street ("Where are you from my friend?"/ "You like tour?"/ "You like to change money?"). A girl across the street whistled and waved at me. There was a predatory feel to Boca Chica that I hadn't encountered in Cabarete. Cabarete had felt like a laid back tourist town, Boca Chica was pushier, its touts were slicker and more aggressive. Something told me that I would have to keep on my toes here.

I hurriedly looked for a hotel, it was pouring rain and I was looking forward to a warm shower and a change of clothing. I ended up at the Aparthotel Madjera. The Madjera is Italian owned and it was almost immediately obvious that almost all the clientele was Italian. The manager, a young Italian, was friendly and showed me a few rooms. I had read about this place in the LP guide under places to stay in the "Mid-Range section". The Madjera, among other things, has its rooms described as "Tastefully done". "If you prefer quiche to a hamburger, you'd likely like this place," says the writer. Yes, he actually wrote "likely like", an unforgivable faux-pas really that will hopefully get him sent somewhere where they have no paper. On top of bad grammar, I'll bet the guy decorates his lawn with pink plastic swans – because the Madjera was honestly tacky as all hell. The best of the rooms was very, very basic. A plain room with a large window looking out over a back alley. It had paper-thin doors and a kitschy Hawaiian-looking mural on the wall behind the bed. The bathroom was plain, everything looked old. But, as I discovered turning the TV on (which was conveniently located high up on the wall, perfect for viewing while lying horizontally in bed), the hotel had access to the Playboy channel. That was about the only perk here, the Madjera, at \$26 US a night, is nothing great and I would have moved on had it not been raining and had I not been staying in Boca Chica just one night. Maybe the reviewer meant "If you prefer kitsh to a hamburger, you'd likely like this place". Yeah, that's it.

I've always been a big fan of Lonely Planet, but the 2002 edition of LP's "Dominican Republic & Haiti" just stinks. It's the worst of the LP guides I've seen; travel times are often wrong and hotel information is sparse and outdated. I also find that there's an opinionated, biased tone to the book that shouldn't belong in a traditional 'guidebook'.

Armed with shorts and a t-shirt, I went out to explore. I walked about 50 feet to the wide beach. Palm trees doted the white sand. But the rain kept coming down and I was soon drenched. Still I walked the beach, reaching the far western end before turning around, passing where Juan Jose, Vilada, and I had had our little beach party, all the way to the wall that separated the public beach from the exclusive Coral Hamaca hotel. Altogether about a kilometre of beautiful beach.

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I was wet and honestly a little cold; walked up to the main road where I passed tacky stores and small, crappy looking restaurants. I ended up having a mid-afternoon lunch in a German restaurant. Three middle-aged German men sat around talking, arguing, while a few black girls sat in the corner looking bored.

Hmm, what to do on a rainy day in Boca Chica? I went back to the room and laid back watching the Playboy channel. There were a couple of girls, dressed in lingerie and lounging about on a sofa, talking about men's balls and how they like them trimmed; "guys, trim the fur off that sack and leave a bit of fuzz up top". Jesus, you know our society is screwed-up when we start talking about coiffures for balls. I also read Lonely Planet; "Activities" in Boca Chica, according to LP, revolve around the beach "Chief of which is spreading out a towel on the sand and paying homage to the skin-cancer god". Okay, that's the last straw – I would honestly send the writer to review Antarctica or Siberia instead of a tropical sun destination.

It was dark and the rain had stopped when I walked out of the hotel. Down the main road I found a little Italian restaurant that had tables spilling out into the street. I was feeling nicely relaxed and happy and I struck a conversation with the single man at the next table. His name was Roberto, an Italian from Rome. Mid-thirties, of medium build, stylishly bald, a semi-permanent looking stubble on his face, well-dressed. He looked so Italian. He didn't speak either English or French; we ended up conversing in Spanish. He was finishing up his meal but offered to have a beer with me a bit later.

So it was that Roberto and I had some drinks just outside the "Cosmos disco", the most popular disco in Boca Chica. The street had been closed off and bars had put tables in the street. It was perfect; sitting there, amidst other occupied tables, smoking a cigar and watching Boca Chica's nightlife. Roberto, I learned, owned a bakery with his brother in Rome. He had two weeks of vacation a year and he always spent those two weeks in Boca Chica.

"Why just Boca Chica? There's a lot of beautiful places here."

"Girls. Here many girls. And close to airport."

He had been with 10 girls in the 5 days he had been here. He had never even gone to Santo Domingo which was only a half hour away. A pity, I thought, there were so many nicer places in the DR. I didn't like Boca Chica; it was decrepit, run-down, fun of hustlers. The Dominicans here weren't the friendly Dominicans I had met elsewhere. There was nothing here except a beach and a lot of prostitutes – and a town that made its living around these two drawing cards. It was also old; perverted old men talking about sauerkraut and weinersnitzel and running around with young girls. A sad sight and one that made me ashamed to be a tourist here. No, I didn't like Boca Chica. BUT I was still happy to be here for one night. It was great to be sitting outdoors on a tropical night, beautiful Dominican girls around, many blowing us kisses or just winking at us.

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On the bus to the Samana Peninsula

The rain had stopped and I woke up to a cloudy morning, the sun trying to make its way out. I had contemplated a day of relaxation, but the weather decided it for me. I was going to the Samana Peninsula. I changed, packed, and boarded a gua-gua for Santo Domingo, smiling in satisfaction at the large clouds rolling in from the sea. Another perfect travel day.

The gua-gua made its way into busy Santo Domingo, traffic and noise everywhere. One thing I noticed, which I hadn't seen the last time, were election posters. They were all over the place – Leonel Fernandez (the ex-president), Eduardo Estrella (wasn't he the star of that Police show "CHIPS"?), and president Hipolito Mejia were the main ones, but there were tons of others too. Politicians, all smiling and happy. For once, I'd like to see an advertisement for a politician who's not smiling, some miserable looking SOB with a sign worded something like "You see these other guys around me smiling? Well that's because they're already thinking about how they're going to screw you. Do you see me smiling?" I'd vote for the guy. Anyway, I hadn't realized that the Dominican Republic was gearing up for elections (scheduled for May of 2004)

The driver dropped me off downtown where I took a taxi to the large Caribe Tours bus terminal. I bought a ticket from a pretty girl who giggled over my pronunciation of Samana ("Sa-ma-NA, not Sa-mana"), rolling her eyes like I had issued a public fart or something.

It was a long bus ride, hills turning to flat, marshy terrain, turning back to hillier territory. The bus is supposed to take 3 ½ hours from Santo Domingo to Samana. Which would have meant arrival just before dark, a little before 6. I realized that there was no way that would happen. We hit the northern coast as the sun was descending, rays of sun actually penetrating through the clouds and throwing golden rays on a long, white-sanded coastline fringed with tall palm trees.

We continued on, the bus climbing hills through the dusk, lush valleys below momentarily flashing between trees. We passed through little hillside towns, Christmas lights catching my eye. Every house seemed to have some kind of Christmas ornament up – it was November 10th. It struck me that there were already more lights and ornaments here than there would be on Christmas day in Montreal – I found that sweet, in a charming way, but also kind of sad and desperate. Made me think of how we Canadians start wearing shorts the minute the snow starts to melt, desperately, as if our white legs will somehow make summer come just a little quicker. If that's not bad enough, we make up some stupid myth about a groundhog coming out of the ground to let us know if summer is on its way. Now that's desperate.

The bus was almost empty, many had gotten off at the rather large town of San Francisco de Macoris. There were probably 5 of us left, the bus motoring high speed along a little country road.

"Anyone getting out for Las Terrenas?" The assistant to the bus driver addressing the few remaining passengers.

I was the only one. Las Terrenas was my stop. I of course had no idea where exactly the town was, or how to get there. All I know was that the bus was slowing down, easing to a stop in the darkness.

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The bus door opened and I stepped out to be assailed by young men, about 10 to 12 of them, young men saying things; “Motoconcho!”/“Where you go?”/ “I take you”. They were aggressive, jostling me...

“Wow, wow, relax”. I found my voice, “Need car to Las Terrenas, no motoconcho”

“Here car, you pay me commission, my friend has car”.

I had by this time taken my bag out of the hold of the bus and shrugged off several requests from youths looking to take my bag. The bus was speeding away in the night.

A young man in a yellow shirt came forward, the owner of the said car.

“How much for you to take me to Las Terrenas?”

“\$20 dollars”.

I hummed and hawed but honestly had no choice, felt a little intimidated to be here by myself with all these youths surrounding me. “Okay, \$20”.

We walked to the car, which was actually an old red pickup. The other young men were still at it, “Give me commission”.

“No commission”.

I threw the bag in the back of the pickup, the youths now talking to the driver, the driver shrugging his head, voices getting raised and heated. The driver spoke in a soft voice but failed to satisfy a few of the youths who continued arguing. The driver gave one last shrug and we entered the cab of the pickup.

We drove along the main road about five minutes before suddenly turning off onto a smaller route which seemed to head straight up a dark mountain. “Where are you going?” I asked, by this time a bit paranoid. I was in an unmarked truck going off somewhere in the dark.

“Las Terrenas”, said the driver, looking at me quizzically. He explained that the bus had stopped near the town of Sanchez, on the south side of the Samana Peninsula. Las Terrenas was on the north side – in between lay a range of mountains. “Very mountainous”

I was still getting over the adrenaline rush of the youths and their aggressiveness. I realized upon reflection that the initial jostling and pushiness wasn’t directed at me, each was just trying to outdo the other to get my attention. They just wanted my business. If they had wanted to mug, beat and murder me (and dump my body off the side of the road), they could have. I had been alone, in the dark, a stranger who didn’t know where he was or where he was going. But they hadn’t, they hadn’t laid a hand on me.

The driver’s name was Brigido and he ended up being a hell of a nice guy. He told me about the places to visit in the area; the El Limon waterfall, Parque National Los Haites, Los Galeras at the tip of the peninsula... Samana peninsula was a beautiful, lush, and mountainous area, one of the most beautiful places in the country. I could see that just from the drive through the mountains; up and down, the road winding around cliffs, great vistas of sea suddenly opening up, the moon shining off the water far below. Lush vegetation was all around, bushes and trees off the side of the road, branches knocking off the top of the cab, the noise of insects in the undergrowth. It took about 30 minutes of mountain driving before we started heading down towards the town of Las Terrenas.

Las Terrenas / Playa Bonita

The long main road coming down from the mountain was bordered by private homes and a few stores. It was very quiet. About a kilometre further, the road suddenly hits the beach and a cemetery. Off to the sides are a few quiet beachside restaurants, bars, and a small plaza of souvenir stores. There were high palm trees everywhere and the sound of the surf breaking on the beach. This was “Downtown” Las Terrenas.

I ended up getting a room at the Punta D’Oro Hotel (not listed in LP). It was actually a beautiful bungalow-type apartment with a large kitchen/living room area and a big bedroom – and lots of windows everywhere with wooden shutters. I even had my own little terrace amid a nice garden. The owner was a sweaty but friendly German man. It was quiet and peaceful, the sounds of the night penetrating the shuttered windows. I already knew that I would love Las Terrenas.

It was about 9 pm when I headed out of my room for a bit of sightseeing. I walked the quiet beach road in the dark, the wind rustling the palm trees above my head. I had supper in a quiet restaurant, then strolled down a dirt road along the beach where there were a few small restaurants and bars (where nothing much was happening). “Motoconcho?” asked a young man, pulling up with his motorcycle.

“Okay, sure,” I said, “You can take me for a tour”.

Hanging on, the motoconcho took me down the main road where I had come from with Brigido, then turned right just before starting up the hills for Sanchez. “I show you Playa Bonita” said the driver (Playa Bonita means “Beautiful Beach”). We were in the dark of the night, the motorcycle bouncing along a dirt track in the middle of nowhere, vegetation all around. The track met up with a larger dirt road. “Playa Bonita” said Luis indicating the length of the road. We passed a few small hotels, I saw a long beach and many palm trees, the night quiet and the moon full in the sky. It was very peaceful and I imagined myself being Robinson Crusoe on one of his many nights in the tropics (the only difference being that I was on the back of a motorcycle holding on to a Dominican guy...and I had a nice hotel not far away with unlimited access to food, beer, women, and rum...)

Paco Cabana / The Bush-loving American

The few bars in Las Terrenas were playing music by the time we got back in town. The nicest and most happening bar seemed to be the “Paco Cabana” disco on the conjunction of the main road and the beach, right in the center of town next to the plaza and restaurants. That’s where I went. Paco Cabana was a beautiful outdoor bar with a large dance floor, the beach in the background. And, not surprisingly, some pretty Dominican chicas standing around the bar talking.

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I bought myself a beer at the bar and sat down on a couch, content to watch some girls laughing and dancing on the dance floor. I suddenly heard a dog barking and a loud voice: “Shut Up you stupid mutt” – I turned around to see a skinny, middle-aged man with grey hair, his ankle bandaged up, his arm up in the air waving a cane at a retreating white dog, “Damn dog!” He dragged his leg along like a cripple, making it to a chair into which he fell heavily “Fucken leg!” He was by himself as I was. I decided to go over and say hi; “You want me to get you a beer?” “That’s very nice of you. My name’s David”

David was an American from Washington who had decided to take his retirement in Las Terrenas.

“I fucken love it here, the people are great, the weather is fantastic, and look at those asses – you never see asses like that in America! I love it down here” He’d been in Las Terrenas for 2 months and was actually staying in the hotel right next to mine (the “Oasis”). “Where are you from?”

“Canada”

“You guys have that guy who talks funny for president, the arrogant, condescending bastard!” “You mean Jean Chretien? He’s not president, he’s Prime Minister. And you’re one to talk with that Mr. Bush!”

He was good-natured about it all though and I enjoyed chatting with him. He had wanted to escape the USA; “The liberals have ruined it all, I have to sign a piece of paper every time I want to take a shit.” Ronald Reagan was “The best president of all time.” I didn’t want to talk politics with him – Americans are just about the friendliest people around but their politics suck. So we talked about other things; “My leg” he pointed at his ankle, “That happened at the pool place – I tried to break up 2 Dominicans arguing and somehow ended up getting whacked by a pool stick. I had a big bruise that infected up on me. But you wouldn’t believe how nice people have been. The two guys came to see me later and apologized, the nurse at the hospital came to see me the other day to see how my ankle was doing, even a few of the girls here called me out of the blue to see how I was.” He pointed out a girl at the bar; “See her? That’s Honeybuns, I don’t know what her real name is but that’s what I call her. She was in the bar that night and saw everything. She called me when I came out of the hospital and I don’t even know her. People here are good, I love them.”

David and I had a good time drinking, exchanging stories and talking to a few of the girls. I went back to the hotel at around 2 am, having enjoyed my first evening in Las Terrenas.

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Around Las Terrenas

I woke up to sporadic, light rain, the sun trying to make its way through the clouds. I decided to rent a moped. I ended up getting a yellow Yamaha Passola for \$20 per day – a sexy little thing and it was supposedly klutz-proof.

The main road from Las Terrenas leads in 2 directions – west (turning south) towards Sanchez, or east towards the town of Samana and the rest of the Samana Peninsula. I started east, driving the Passola along a beautiful, well-cared for road which followed the white-beached coast before turning inland, palm trees soaring above the road, verdant vegetation among the hills making for a beautifully green landscape. 10 minutes into my drive I passed the tiny airport at El Portillo, a couple of multiprop Air Santo Domingo planes parked next to the single runway. I continued on into the hills, the road winding, trees and lushness everywhere. There was no traffic, I drove for about 20 minutes and encountered one car and a truck coming from the opposite direction. I passed little communities of shacks, people turning at the sound of the approaching motorcycle, children happily waving at me. It was great, the wind in my hair, the liberating feel of being able to go anywhere I wanted.

I went as far as Barbacoa before turning back to Las Terrenas, going right through town towards Playa Bonita. I had to leave the main road and make my way along dirt roads through the countryside before meeting up with the larger dirt road which follows the coast at Playa Bonita. Along the road are well-spaced, quiet hotels amid the lush vegetation, ocean and high palm trees on the other side of the road, white sanded beaches with views of high cliffs and hills flanking the coast as far as the eye could see. It was quiet, no sounds except for the wind and the sea. It was magnificent.

I had a nice lunch at a small restaurant overlooking the beach, a party of loud French people next to me getting drunk on red wine as French people are wont to do. I had saved the best for the afternoon. I decided to ride the Passola across the mountains towards Sanchez, back through the mountains that I had seen the previous night.

The motorcycle climbed the high hills and rounded bends in the road, affording views of the white beaches of Playa Bonita and Las Terrenas. Bali-like hills jutted out, light green grass contrasting with the darker greens of palm and banana trees. There was a lookout from where I had views over the whole of the North coast. The sun came out and made the natural beauty that much more stunning. I continued on, the road winding through the hilly countryside, passing little villages and pastures. I saw cows and children, but the highlight was the incredible natural beauty of the terrain. Nowhere was it more beautiful than at the lookout facing the south side of the Samana Peninsula. From there I had incredible views of the whole bay, mountains far on the other side, the lowlands of Parque Nacional Los Haties in the armpit of the bay. Sanchez was directly below around a bend.

I parked the bike and was taking pictures when an older white man with a foxy-looking Dominican wife and daughter pulled up. I started chatting with him. He pointed out a few points of interest down below. Sanchez, for example, had been a major sugar port and still had

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remnants of the old train tracks which ran from it's port to La Vega in the country's agricultural heartland. He also mentioned the Humpback whales which migrate here every year and which make the peninsula the most popular whale watching destination in the Caribbean. I thanked him "Thank you, I actually knew all that stuff but I didn't want to interrupt you because I was checking out your wife. You must have a great sex life." I didn't really say that.

I drove back through the beautiful countryside. It had been a fabulous excursion.

I arrived back at the hotel where I met a friendly Dominican man at the reception. I asked him his name: "Fortuna" he said laughing, "My parents hoped the name would help me become rich" ("Fortuna" literally means "Fortune" in English) He was the only Dominican that I had met who was perfectly fluent in English – we ended up speaking at length on the terrace of the hotel reception. I asked him about the demonstrations in Santo Domingo and why people didn't like the current president, Hipolito Mejia. I was told something I was to hear from many Dominicans; "He is corrupt, steals money. Why do you think there are so many candidates to be president in the Dominican Republic? I tell you why – it's because it's like winning the lottery! Money, money, money..." He told me a story about the government destroying rice fields near his hometown of Nagua to justify a trade agreement with Taiwan: "See, anything to get bribes!"

Fortuna talked about the current financial crisis; "Look at me, I am good example: I work full time as a teacher at high school, I also work part time at two hotels. You know how much I make as a teacher? 3,000 pesos a month". He took out his calculator "6 months ago it was 20 pesos to one dollar, so I made \$150 US a month. Now 40 pesos to the dollar, so now I make \$75 a month! And prices much higher because everything is imported; very, very expensive... The government doesn't understand the people".

He told me that many Dominicans go to Miches (not far from Las Terrenas) where they try to escape the island by taking illegal boats to Puerto Rico – "But sometimes accidents, operators take advantage and put too many people in the boats – the currents are strong and there are sharks".

Fortuna recounted these stories in typical Dominican fashion, shaking his head one minute, laughing the next. "We are poor. But you know why we have Haitians working here? Because they are poorer!" He laughed. It seemed to me that Dominicans are so used to a hard life and corruption from their government that they have come to accept it and even joke about it. I have heard other Dominicans discussing corruption. Instead of anger they laugh at the audacity of their elected officials. Maybe that's why politics here never change? It crossed my mind.

I called Juan Jose in Santo Domingo later in the afternoon and surprised him with the news that I was in the DR. He seemed really happy, then asked (as I knew he would) "Franko, why didn't you let me know before?" I explained that I had decided to come at the very last minute, that I had tried to call but hadn't been able to get through on his cellphone. The truth was that I didn't want to spend my whole vacation with Juan Jose – seeing him for a few days was fine, but I didn't want him planning on spending more time with me. That was the reason for the 2 day pre-advice.

On the bike from Las Terrenas to Las Galeras

I woke up early the next morning with the goal of making it to the end of the Semana Peninsula.

I got on the motorbike and started heading east, passing the town of Barbacoa and heading south-east into hillier ground, the hills high and lush. The road seemed to follow the backbone of the peninsula, riding high in the hills, spectacular views of the Bay of Samana appearing to the south as I approached the town of Samana.

Samana had a pretty, sheltered harbour around which curved the main road. I parked the motorcycle and had lunch in a cozy little French restaurant with views over the harbour. The place was run by a friendly French couple. Sitting on the steps of the restaurant a few feet from me, their little girl of about 10 years old was talking to a couple of similarly-aged Dominican boys; smiling, blond ponytails bobbing. She spoke perfect Spanish. What an experience, I thought, a little girl growing up in a developing country, learning a foreign language. And making friends, oblivious to the differences of race as only children are. Her parents went about their chores, happily chatting to a few Dominicans who popped into the restaurant, the little girl playing outside the restaurant with her friends. Despite preconceived ideas of the “Dangers of the third world”, on closer inspection it seemed to me that the DR was as safe a place as any to raise a child. I often saw children by themselves; going to the store, playing, little boys shining shoes for change. Missing was the fear of strangers that you see in North America or Europe. Maybe it was the Latin sense of community and their love for children, but you could feel that residents here – the French family included – had confidence that their children were living in a safe environment.

I continued on after lunch; getting soaked to the bone during a torrential rainstorm just outside Samana, then speeding by flat, fertile fields as I approached Las Galeras, the sun actually making an appearance. I saw a rugged, spectacularly beautiful coastline, the green fields meeting cliffs that fell into the pounding blue-green waves below.

Las Galeras is a very small town. I entered the village, passed a couple of blocks of stores and restaurants, and suddenly found myself on the beach that marks the end of the road. The geographical beauty was spectacular. Las Galeras lies within a large bay with white, white sand, high palm trees, and magnificent views of high hills far across the bay. Words don't do it justice, it was gorgeous. Actually, the whole drive through the Samana Peninsula had been quite incredible.

I bought some beer, put on my bathing suit and stretched out on the beautiful beach. I had been lying there, in the sun, for about half an hour when I looked up to see a huge, grey shape making its way across the distant hills. The shape moved quickly, the clear blue sky pushed aside by the increasingly dark, angry clouds. Lines of heavy rain were visible far away, the humid whiff of the downpour reaching all the way across the bay.

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5 minutes later I was having a coffee on the terrace of the very upscale Club Bonito Hotel, the sky completely dark and the heavens pouring down. I wasn't going back to Las Terrenas any time soon. I decided to rent a room for the night; it was stunning, the room large and airy with magnificent views over the bay. Las Galeras was incredibly beautiful.

Brigido / Sanchez

I woke up at dawn to a magnificent morning. I packed up, had breakfast, and drove back to Las Terrenas, the scenery even more glorious under the shining sun. I honestly didn't feel like leaving the Samana Peninsula; it was laid back and I could have spent the rest of my holidays riding around and exploring on the Passola. But I had Juan Jose to see and new places to discover. I settled my bill at the Punta D'Oro and called Brigido for the lift to the bus station in Sanchez.

Brigido and his pickup arrived early. I really liked him; Brigido glowed with happiness, a relaxed smile perpetually on his face. We drove through the beautiful hills again.

“We will be early, I give you a tour of Sanchez”

We passed the remains of the old train station (nothing more than a structure of corrugated metal siding) and the port (dirty, with a few rusty motorboats used for fishing and giving tours to tourists). Brigido then suggested that we pass by his house “I have a pretty sister to introduce you to”. I thought it would be impolite to say no.

Brigido's house was quite spacious, with many rooms. I met his wife and their cute daughter, along with his father, 3 brothers and 2 sisters. They seemed relatively well off, but you could see that many of the appliances that North Americans take for granted were missing; dishes were stacked for drying on the kitchen counter, clothes were hung out to dry in the back. It also struck me again how large Dominican families were.

Brigido drove me to the bus station and we said our goodbyes. I promised to call him if I ever came to the Samana Peninsula again.

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Santo Domingo

The bus rolled into Santo Domingo about 4 hours later, the sky already dark. I had been nervous about the mood in the capital. TV in Las Terrenas had shown scenes of violent demonstrations and looting earlier in the week, protests against the increasing cost of living and frequent power outages affecting the city. In fact “at least” 6 people had been left dead, the police had used rubber bullets and tear gas to subdue the crowd.

Things seemed normal taking the taxi to the Zona Colonial. The streets were dark, the traffic crazy – typically Santo Domingo.

I ended up staying to the Hotel El Conde de Penalba (\$60/night), right across the plaza from the Catedral Primada de America. That’s where I called Juan Jose;
“HOLA JUAN JOSE!”
“HOLA FRANKO ! MI BRODER FROM CANADA!”

He met me at the El Conde restaurant, a big smile on his face. It was nice catching up with him. Work was going well, he was still fiancé and was supposedly getting married in August of 2004. “Franko, on Sunday we go to Puerto Plata, you meet my novia Marielle!” (“novia” means “Girlfriend”)
“Okay Juan Jose, we go to Puerto Plata on Sunday”.

Getting pissed off in a Santo Domingo strip bar

Juan Jose took me over the over the bridge into the eastern part of the city, coming to a stop at one of those little corner stores called a “Colmado”, a store/bar that opens right up onto the street (they are everywhere in the DR and seem to be the center of congregation among Dominicans who come to talk and drink). Juan Jose seemed to know everyone there; I was quickly introduced to Roberto and a bunch of other friends, all in their late 20s/early 30s. A happy, portly fellow came up to me and gave me a glass full of ice which he promptly filled up with rum – he probably thought that I couldn’t handle straight rum because he laughed watching me guzzling it down and gave me a slap on the back which almost knocked out my contact lenses. Everyone was friendly and we sat on plastic chairs outside the store, drinking and talking and watching the baseball game that was playing on the TV set sitting on the store counter.

We then went to Eagle Fast Food, the Hooter-like restaurant/bar where Juan Jose had taken me on my first visit. Funny enough, he had mentioned on the way that we were going to a bar “With sexy girls”. “Not the same place as last time?” I had asked. He had assured me that we would see something new. So I was surprised when the taxi dropped us (Juan Jose, Roberto, and I) just outside the doors of Eagle Fast Food. It was actually a bit boring. Maybe the novelty had just worn off – yes, even ogling breasts can get boring. Roberto was slightly drunk and a bit too loud for my taste (“THAT GIRL HAS NICE TITS, AIII!”) and I felt slightly embarrassed in the way that a sober person does in the company of grossly inebriated company. Half an hour later the

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portly rum guy showed up with his girlfriend and gave me another happy slap on the back, this one making beer pop back up my nose. We all decided to move on somewhere else. I paid the bill and we left.

The place advertised itself as a strip bar from the outside, red and blue neon highlighting posters of sexy looking girls. But when we walked in I saw people, including couples, dancing merengue together on the stage and figured that it was just an ordinary bar. We sat next to the stage and ordered a large bottle of Brugal rum and a bottle of coke which they brought along with a bucket of ice.

Shortly after, the music took on a different, slower beat and everyone got off the stage to be replaced by a rather large, ugly girl who first proceeded to take off her clothes then started doing Olympic-like cartwheels around the stage. Roberto seemed to like her though; he smiled at her and stuck his head a bit too far over the bar separating our table from the stage. The next thing I saw was the girl jumping off the stage and doing a Pommel horse landing on Roberto's face, her uhh...reproductive organs...straddling his nose like a cowboy on a bucking bull. Roberto seemed quite happy judging by the dopey looking smile on his face. It reminded me of a scene in a Buttman movie (just browse the internet for Buttman, he's easy to find). A typical Buttman conversation; "Hey, you have an great butt! You want to sit down? No, not over there, I meant on my face". That was Roberto.

The truth of it was that I just couldn't get into it that night – the alcohol was having no effect on me and I wasn't enjoying the company. I was getting sick of paying for everything. The waiter came to collect for the bottles of rum and coke (plus for a beer for Roberto) and I was the only one pulling out my wallet. I didn't say anything but it peed me off. We left shortly after, getting back into the portly guy's car.

Juan Jose: "Franko, You like Dominican Republic? We go somewhere else?"

"YEAH! YEAH!" said Roberto.

"No Juan Jose, I'm tired," I said. "I want to go back to hotel"

"You tired?" asked the portly guy in disbelief.

"Yes," said I.

Juan Jose and I got out and said goodbye to his friends.

"Juan Jose, I don't like that. Your friends abused. I don't mind going out with you and paying your drinks, but I'm not going to pay for the drinks of all your friends!"

"Lo siento Franko" ("I'm sorry Franko") said Juan Jose. "You are right, my friends abused". I wanted to make it clear to Juan Jose that I wouldn't be paying drinks for all his friends the entire weekend.

It hadn't been a great evening and I regretted having left Las Terrenas for Santo Domingo.

The malecon / plastic / Casa de Chicas #1

My project for the day was to walk the malecon (the sea wall). The malecon follows avenue George Washington for about 8 kilometres from the Zona Colonial. I had seen the historical sights in the Zona Colonial on my previous visit, this time I wanted to see the geography and, to be honest, I just felt like taking a long walk and getting some exercise.

The malecon is actually great for a walk or a jog; the pavement is about 10 feet wide, palm trees ringing the edge of the seawall. Below there are nice views of waves crashing against the cliffs, a few sandy coves interrupting the predominant rock face. But like a 50 year old Westmount ex-hottie wearing a 36 DD push-up bra within a tight fitting lycra bodysuit, the seawall looks good from far, but, on closer inspection, far from good. It is here that I came face to face with a modern plague, one of the biggest environmental problems of our time: plastic debris. Every cove was littered with mountains of plastic. Bottles and containers, plastic on top of plastic, in some places up to 3 feet high, almost every inch of those coves littered with plastic. Plastic floated on the surface of the sea, plastic containers bounced off the cliffs as the waves rolled in. The beautifully blue/green sea didn't look so inviting anymore. I sure as hell wouldn't have wanted to stick my feet in there or walk that sand, even minus the plastic. It was like finding out that your girlfriend has crabs – sure, you can buy an overnight cream and kill the crabs, but what else is in there that you don't know about?

Opposite of the sea wall, across from avenue George Washington, are Santo Domingo's glitziest hotels; The Renaissance Jaragua Hotel, The Hotel Intercontinental, The Hotel El Napolitano. As I walked a few men, "Guides", came across the street to talk to me, offering their services or inviting me to bars across the street "You sit, drink beer and talk to beautiful chicas..." I thanked them but I wasn't interested. They didn't insist. I walked on, saw some boys on a rock, fishing rods extended out over the edge of the cliffs. I somehow doubted that they would catch anything more than plastic Coca-Cola bottles. Just thinking this made me upset. What is Coca-Cola? I'll tell you what it is – it's water, citric acid, phosphoric acid and a whole bunch of other artificial ingredients. Has it bettered humankind? Does it cure sick children? Or starving refugees? Is the world better off having Coca-Cola? Of course not. Coca-Cola is tap water with chemicals. It's junk water. The only legacy from Coca-Cola are the plastic bottles and the eroded stomach linings resulting from drinking that stuff. Coca-Cola is just another example of what's wrong with the world today. It's consumerism and commercialization gone rampant at the expense of the environment. Yes, I can hear you now; "Bloody commie, I'll never read his shit again." I don't think anyone really understands until they've seen the heaps of plastic washing up on the shores of the DR.

I went about 6 or 7 kilometres before deciding to head back, the view of sea and high-rises becoming monotonous. I was at a little tienda, buying water, when I was approached by an elderly man. He spoke perfect English, which is always a surprise here, but the first thing I noticed was that his mouth frothed a lot (looking back, he might have been suffering from Parkinson's disease). But he seemed otherwise perfectly normal and he tagged along with me a while, asking me many of the usual type questions. He was very eager to please and I felt sorry for him. His name was Juan and he offered to give me a little tour. "I know good hotels very

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close to Zona Colonial which are not so expensive. I'm also going to show you a place with girls".

"Okay," I said, "We can go look".

We were close to the Zona Colonial, walking up Calle Danae, a small residential street in the shadows of Hotel El Napolitano, when Juan pointed out a low-story office building with a dark glass door. He rang and the door opened up. We stepped into a reception area, a lady smiling and greeting us. Beyond, in the background, was a living room with low lights where I saw a few sexy-looking ladies sitting around in lingerie. Juan smiled and started chatting with the lady at the reception, seemingly talking about the weather. It struck me how casual Dominicans are about prostitution and sex in general – bouncing in as if going for a haircut, chatting as relaxed as can be "Hi Maria, how is the action today? How are the kids? Say, what's the lunch-time special? I wouldn't mind a blowjob but I rather fancy a bit of beaver today..." I felt shy, strolling into a "Casa de Chicas" (as they are known – and there seem to be many in the DR) made me feel uncomfortable. Juan; "You come here, it's a good place" With that he started quoting me prices as if we had pulled up to the pick-up window at the local Tits & Pussy – "one hour not expensive, you can also have for many hours. For all night it's more expensive, 2000 pesos (\$50) but girls here are clean and very nice." He chatted and we left, waving goodbyes to the girls.

Right across the street were a couple of hotels which Juan showed me. They were actually quite okay, and at 450 pesos (about \$11), it was quite a deal compared to the hotels half a kilometre away in the zona colonial (The best of these hotels was La Gran Mansion, Calle Danae #26, tel: 682-2033) Juan: "See, I show you good places in Santo Domingo – you get girl, then you take her to cheap hotel. It's the good life!"

Walking back towards the Zona Colonial, Juan started talking about having to pay the rent for his apartment that night... "How much is your rent Juan?"

"600 Pesos".

I gave him 600 pesos, "Here, you pay your rent"

He looked happy and continued on with me. We arrived at the gate to the Zona Colonial where I turned to say my goodbyes, telling him that I would go for a coffee "Can I come for coffee with you?" asked Juan. "Okay," I said.

We had a coffee together, whereupon I told him that I was going back to the hotel "Thank you Juan for the tour, it was very interesting".

I knew this was coming; "Frank, can I have a bit more money? For food?"

"Juan, today I paid your rent. Tomorrow you find another tourist to pay your food"

He smiled, no problem. "I like giving you tour," said Juan. We shook hands, I took his picture and we said our goodbyes.

There is a famous saying that my bosses always tell me; "You don't ask, you don't get". Funny enough, they always forget this at evaluation time "You've got a hell of a nerve asking for a raise!" Anyway, nobody practices this saying more than Dominicans. No matter how much you give them, no matter how generous you have been, they will always try for a little more. I've never seen anything like it, it happens every time.

Dominican Baseball

The Dominican Republic is the hotbed of baseball, nowhere is it taken more seriously than it is taken here. For many it is the one way to escape a life of poverty. Famous Dominican players, off the top of my head; Vladimir Guerrero, Sammy Sosa, Pedro Martinez, Manny Ramirez, Moises Alou. There are 6 teams in the Dominican League, made up of mostly Dominican players but also some very talented American, Mexican, and Puerto Rican players.

Juan Jose met me at the hotel and we took the taxi to Santo Domingo's Quisqueya Stadium, bought some tickets, and made our way through the tunnel to the stands. The first thing that struck me was how close to the field the seats are. The views are great. We sat down and ordered bottles of rum and coke from a man wearing a red uniform, bottles of rum hanging from around his neck. That was so cool; we spent the rest of the night making ourselves rum and cokes. Another thing that struck me was the electric atmosphere – fans wave the flag of their favourite team and loudly cheer the most mundane of plays on the field. If anything really exciting happens they're jumping up and down as if their seats had magically transformed into trampolines. They even dance to the Merengue music that blasts out during stoppages of play. It's a real party and the game was very exciting – the home team, the Tigers del Licey, ended up losing in the 9th inning to the visitors, the Pollos Nacionales from San Francisco de Macoris. The "Pollos Nacionales" literally mean "National Chickens" (just had to mention that). For more on Dominican baseball, go to www.baseballguru.com.

Casa de Chicas #2 / malecon discos

I had decided that I wanted to go to the disco at the Hotel El Napolitano on the malecon that night. Yes, it was the trendy part of town ("Franco, mucho dinero," warned Juan Jose) but I had heard that it was quite happening and I wanted to check it out. We were in the taxi, somewhere in the vicinity of the malecon when Juan Jose had an idea. "Franko, close to here I have a friend, a client, who invited me to a party tonight. Come, why don't we go for a little while, I think there will be many beautiful girls".

"Sure," I said. House parties are always tons of fun and I thought it was a great idea.

His client was rich and/or had something to hide; we had been driving up a quiet residential street when we pulled up to a house, a house hidden behind a high security wall. There was a door in the brick wall guarded by 2 rather large men. I found that a bit strange. We got out of the taxi, the driver chuckling something to Juan Jose. He would wait for us. We went up to the guards. They didn't look like happy guards. Juan Jose explained that he was a friend of so-and-so and that we were invited to the party. They looked at us suspiciously and allowed us to pass with a grunt. Who was his friend? Pablo Escobar? We walked up to the house through the garden, "Juan Jose, what does your friend do? Why does he have those guards?"

"No problema Franko, no es problema mi broder. He's a client, has clothing store. But I think also has Casa de Chicas. No problema, we have a drink and look at the mamacitas!"

Hmm...

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The place was definitely a whorehouse. Juan Jose's "friend" greeted us at the door; we walked into a living room where there were about 15 people, about 12 of them female, most sitting around on sofas in sexy clothing. Felt eyes on the bulge in my pants (ie. my wallet) as we crossed the room to a sofa. A few girls smiled at me, warm welcome smiles that looked so sweet and sincere that they almost brought tears to my eyes.

We sat ourselves down and Juan Jose's friend/client asked us what we wanted to drink. He went off to the kitchen. It was a big house. The living room was very large and there were stairs going up to other levels. But it wasn't very clean; the grey carpets looked dirty, the off-white paint on the walls looked grimy and flaked under the bright lights. It looked like the lobby of a cheap hotel.

Within two minutes of our arrival two girls came over and introduced themselves. Before we could even say anything they had slithered their bodies next to us on the already tight sofa. They spent the next ten minutes trying to seduce us; holding our hands and rubbing up against us. Juan Jose was having TOO good a time, he had his arm around a girl and was massaging her backside. I made sure he/they understood we would be leaving soon;

"Juan Jose, we will go to the discotheque after our drink"

"Okay Franko"

Chica #1; "If you like we can go with you".

Me: "No gracias".

Chica #2: "Why you don't want us? You want to meet other girls at discotheque?"

Me: "Noooo, we don't want any girls! We just came here because Juan Jose knows the boss"

That got the girls cool, suddenly knowing that we had just come on a social visit, not as clients. They weren't so friendly anymore. One of them asked for a tip. "A tip for what?" I asked. The girls left us looking pissed off.

The boss/Juan Jose's friend/client came over shortly after and gave us a bill for the drinks. I found it strange that we would be charged if he was a "friend" or "client" of Juan Jose's. In fact, he wasn't so friendly anymore and we concluded that it was time to go. There was a chill in the air as we got up and left, no sweet/sincere smiles, no looks from the girls.

We took the taxi to The Renaissance Jaragua Hotel, but they were hosting a private party and the disco was closed to the public (it's ordinarily a very popular disco – and it looked pretty good from the outside). We ended up at a disco called "7 to 7", a fancy discotheque with great music and a well-dressed, well-heeled Dominican clientele. We walked out feeling no pain. And I was pretty poor from having paid drinks all night long.

"Franko, don't forget to wake up early, tomorrow we go to Puerto Plata at 7 o'clock".

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To Puerto Plata with Juan Jose and Eduardo

I woke up, showered, and was putting the finishing touches on my packing when the girl at reception called. Juan Jose had shown up. I descended and paid my bill, Juan Jose flirting all the while with the big-breasted girl at the desk.

Juan Jose had arranged a lift to Puerto Plata with his religious friend Eduardo. Seems that Eduardo had a new girlfriend in Puerto Plata, a friend of Juan Jose's girlfriend. Ahh, nothing like those early days in a relationship when you'll drive 4 hours just to spend an afternoon with a sweetheart. Those early days, when a smile and an inadvertent little grazing, a mere touch of a hand or a bumping of forearms bring a flutter to the heart and a blush to the cheeks. Anyway, Juan Jose and I were getting a free ride from the sucker.

Eduardo was all dressed up with a nicely pressed blue shirt and black dress pants. He seemed happy to see me again, shaking my hand before taking my backpack and squishing it into the trunk of his old Toyota.

We drove out of Santo Domingo to the sounds of a preacher sermonizing on the tape deck, Eduardo's bible sitting next to me on the back seat. Midway between Santo Domingo and Puerto Plata (close to La Vega) we stopped for roasted pig. On this stretch of the highway are shacks with covered spits on which huge pigs are roasted over fire – roast pork is very popular in the DR. We had lunch here, the proprietor hacking a few chunks of the roasted meat onto some plates. It tasted great. The only drawback to roasted pig is that you spend the rest of the day with a toothpick in your mouth. It's like having sex with a really hairy person (okay, I admit that's gross...).

Puerto Plata / Playa Dorada

It was a little after noon when we arrived in the outskirts of Puerto Plata.

“Franko, we go see Marielle at her work.”

“No problema Juan Jose.”

“Franko, please don't mention to Marielle anything about us drinking. She doesn't know that I drink. Also, please don't say anything about girls”.

“Okay Juan Jose. You must be happy, tonight you get lucky”.

He laughed, “No, Marielle is a virgin. Only when we get married. We don't even sleep in the same bed. She is good Dominican girl. She mustn't know about other girls”.

It was actually very weird; we drove through Puerto Plata which is a typical Dominican city; it's not pretty, there are no trees. Small stores border the potholed road. The potholes are incredible – you could honestly bury a body in some of PP's potholes. And the traffic; cars, motorcycles, buses, and trucks fighting their way around the potholes while belching black exhaust. No, Puerto Plata is not a pretty town.

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Then we entered Playa Dorada where Marielle works. Playa Dorada is a gated tourist complex, the largest in the country. There are 13 huge, all-inclusive hotels in this area. It's a different world. Clean, manicured gardens, a gorgeous golf course with large, clean ponds, palm trees and flowery bushes lining the perfectly paved road. Tourists walk around everywhere (I hadn't seen even one in Puerto Plata). Parents stroll around with kids, teenagers run around with braided hair. Some of the tourists are on horses or on rented bicycles. There are tennis courts and swimming pools, I even saw a gleaming helicopter landing next to one of the hotels. The hotels themselves are gorgeous – huge, clean complexes with marble, shiny glass, and manicured gardens with fountains. It was nothing like the Dominican Republic. This was another world. You would think that the two worlds overlap but they don't – most tourists never leave Playa Dorada. The few who do leave just long enough to go up Pico Isabel de Torres. Puerto Plata doesn't reap the economic benefits of tourism. It made me wonder who does, apart from the international hotels and the governments that they negotiated their contracts with.

Marielle works in a clothing store in the Playa Dorada Plaza, the shopping center in the middle of the complex. I had somehow thought that she would be a really foxy babe. She wasn't actually. She was a short and plain-looking, and, like Juan Jose, light-skinned. But she had a cute smile and she treated me like a long lost friend. She was very sincere, a very sweet girl with a big heart. Her English was also quite good. Working with Marielle was Janni, the girl that Eduardo had a crush on. She was darker than Marielle, a pretty, equally sweet girl. It was about 1:30 in the afternoon and Marielle told us that she would be finished at 5.

“Juan Jose, you can drop me off downtown. I'm going to get myself a room and we can meet up later”.

“Franko, no, you are my broder. You stay at Marielle's house”.

“Juan Jose, No. I don't want to impose. It's no problem, you can relax later with Marielle. I want to go out and walk a bit and see Puerto Plata”.

Juan Jose wasn't very happy “Si Frank” (he would call me by my English name when he wasn't happy). “We see later, first I show you beach of Playa Dorada”.

We walked over through one of the resorts, coming to a sandy beach full of white people. Again it was so weird; all these mostly older, mostly overweight white people. The few Dominicans we saw wore uniforms and were either tending to the flowery bushes or carrying laundry. It made me think of colonial Africa in my childhood days where we would get served by staff in heavy uniforms, white gloves covering their black hands. Next to the beach was the resort bar. “Let's have a beer and sit down,” I suggested. We sat down at a table with nice views over the beach, Pico Isabel de Torres in the background. The waiter came over and we ordered. “Are you members of this resort?” he asked.

“No,” I replied.

“I'm sorry we cannot serve you”.

“How come? I'll pay in cash, US dollars”

“No, sorry, we are not allowed”.

It was like apartheid. Beer apartheid. I had enough with the whole Playa Dorada scene. “Forget it Juan Jose, let's go”.

Hotel Latin Quarter / the malecon / Big fake boobs

“Juan Jose, let’s go downtown, I’m getting a room”. He didn’t argue this time. I referred to my trusted Lonely Planet and picked out the Hotel Latin Quarter; “52 attractive guest rooms with cable TV, hot-water bathroom and air con... There’s a swimming pool, restaurant and tennis court... An excellent value”. It’s also right across the street from the Oceanside promenade (malecon). I figured a walk would be good after a day spent in the car.

Well, the Latin Quarter wasn’t expensive – 600 pesos or \$15 US. The room was okay; large, with 2 double beds, and a loud air-conditioner (situated where the window used to be). I didn’t spot any cockroaches. I used the bathroom and attempted to wash my hands but came to the realization that there was no water. I went back to the reception where I complained. “It’s okay, truck come soon. Water in 15 minutes” explained the lady. I had no idea what a truck had to do with the water supply but I took her explanation at face value. I went to the car and took my backpack out of the dilapidated Toyota. I was walking back to the room when I spotted the swimming pool. Yes, the swimming pool so prominently described in Lonely Planet. Well, it must have been the swimming pool because the body of moving algae was growing within the confines of what was either the world’s largest flowering pot, a flowering pot dedicated to bacterial remnants similar to the stuff growing in the Tupperware at the back of my fridge, OR it was indeed a swimming pool, because I’ve never seen fungus co-ordinate itself to create a rectangular border around its own perimeter. I bet that the Australian guy, the Crocodile Hunter, wouldn’t approach this pool of fungi-infested water without a stun gun. Just looking at it made me reach for the cock cream (the anti-bacterial penis cream I sometimes borrow from my neighbour Denis – helps me calm those psychological penis itches I sometimes get. I call it the “Cock cream”. “Hey Denis, I got lucky last night. Can I borrow your cock cream?”)

We drove back to Playa Dorada a bit later and picked up Marielle. Everyone seemed tired and neither Juan Jose nor Marielle knew what they were going to do that night.

“Juan Jose, leave me at the hotel. I’m going to take a walk. Come and pick me up later when you guys want to go out”.

Again I sensed he wasn’t happy (“Si Frank”). But I was losing patience. Spending a whole day in a car watching Juan Jose drive was not my idea of fun.

They left me off at the hotel, Juan Jose saying he would come by at about 7. I dumped my bag in the room, went back out and took a motoconcho ride downtown. There wasn’t much to the center of Puerto Plata. The old, cobble-stoned streets and one-story houses did have some charm though. I made a few phone calls from the Codotel office before deciding that I would walk back the 3 or so kilometres to the hotel (The map in LP indicates that’s it’s a little over 1 kilometre. 1 kilometre? – no way in hell, I’d bet my left ball on it!) Just as in Santo Domingo, the malecon in Puerto Plata is a great place for a walk. The sidewalk is wide and there are nice views of the Caribbean Sea. The sun was out and I was happy to be stretching my legs and getting a whiff of fresh air. But, again, I looked at the beach and was surprised by the crap strewn all over the sand. Plastic containers, glass bottles, cans...junk of all kinds.

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The other thing that I was noticing was that Dominicans really like their booze. With dusk falling, the malecon seemed to be the congregation point of locals, all of whom had brought their own beer or rum. As I came up to the hotel, there seemed to be more and more people out on the promenade. It would have been a pity to go in, I decided instead to stay outside and watch the sunset.

About 100 meters from the hotel was a small bar which was set up for the evening. It was a stall, like many other stalls that seem to suddenly decorate the malecon in the early evening. This little bar was cheerily painted in red, beer and rum bottles adorning the shelves behind the counter. I was just going to buy some water and a bottle of rum, but the young, muscular man (late 20's) who ran the bar was so friendly that I sat down on one of the stools. He said that it was his first day in operation, they had just finished putting on the finishing touches. He asked me, in English, where I was from and started to talk about his girlfriend ("My girlfriend is from England, that's why my English is good"). Half an hour later his girlfriend showed up for his opening in a fancy silver SUV. She parked and stepped out – she was at least 45, an attractive white lady with one of the biggest set of fake boobs I've ever seen. Holy Cow – the guy should at least have mentioned it before she came; "Did I mention that my girlfriend has the biggest fake boobs that I'll bet you've ever seen?" At least it would have prepared me. Anyway, she sat a few feet away from me at the bar, her boyfriend introduced us and I said "Hi". She didn't engage in conversation though – struck me that she probably felt that I, as a white male, would be judging her because of her relationship with the young Dominican. 10 minutes later two teen-age girls came by, one was white and obviously the lady's daughter. They also greeted the boyfriend and left. The daughter was actually closer to the boyfriend's age than her mother. But, kidding aside, I didn't have any bad thoughts or judgments – she was living the good life, a white woman living in Dominican luxury, with a sexy young boyfriend to boot (and he was nice on top of that). She had probably left England unhappily and decided to make herself sexy and live life to the fullest. Good for her. You only live life once.

It was getting dark and I walked back to the hotel, only to encounter Juan Jose at the front desk. "Franko, where you go? I was getting worried". THAT is exactly what I don't like about travelling with others. I had really enjoyed my few hours alone. But it was Sunday – Juan Jose would have to go back to Santo Domingo the next day. Great. He was starting to get on my nerves.

We drove 5 minutes to Fort San Felipe, Puerto Plata's old Spanish fort, where we met up with Eduardo and Janni. They were holding hands, Eduardo holding his bible in his free hand (bet you anything he pees in bed...)

Juan Jose: "Franko, we take Eduardo to bus station".

"Why the bus station?"

"Tomorrow he has to work. He's going to leave me the car so I can take you to see the mountains tomorrow" (I had mentioned to him that I planned to visit the mountains near Jarabacoa). Oh man. I couldn't believe it. I had honestly hoped that he would have to rush back to work. Instead he was taking a few days off to be with me. Shit.

Sosua

Juan Jose dropped off Marielle later that evening.

“Franko, there’s some good discotheques in Sosua. Let’s go there”.

I did remember that there were some hot discos in Sosua. But I had read that the place had gone downhill since I had been there 8 years ago (Cabarete now attracted the tourists). Besides which Sosua was a good drive from Puerto Plata. “It’s very far Juan Jose”.

“No, not far Franko. 10 minutes”.

That’s how we ended up driving along the dark, potholed highway to Sosua. An awful drive, Juan Jose seemed to have only the potholes in mind – I had to point out on more than one occasion that we were either going off the road or heading straight into an oncoming truck. Another problem were the lights on Eduardo’s shitty Toyota; we could barely see 10 feet ahead of us. I regretted having agreed to go to Sosua. Besides everything else, it wasn’t 10 minutes (surprise, surprise). It took exactly 25 minutes.

Sosua was dead. Juan Jose drove around, asking a few security guards about a good discotheque. They looked around and shrugged. There were a couple of bars on the main street with a few old men and young hookers, but nothing else. It was pathetic. There was nothing. A couple of aggressive dogs started barking and chased the car. The reports that I had read were true. Sosua is dead.

It wasn’t much of an evening and I felt like going back to my hotel room.

Juan Jose; “Franko, can I stay in your room tonight?”

“I guess so, how come?”

“There’s not much room at Marielle’s house”. I honestly didn’t understand that. All day he had been a pain in the ass trying to convince me to sleep at Marielle’s. As if spending the whole day in the car with him wasn’t enough, now I couldn’t even have my hotel room to myself.

Pico Isabel de Torres

The next morning Juan Jose suggested that we take the teleferico up the mountain with Marielle. I had been up Pico Isabel de Torres on my trip 8 years ago. The teleferico ride is cool, the views are great. At the top are gardens – all unkept. Puerto Plata is falling apart and the facilities on the mountain are no exception. But here again the views are super. Spreading far below is the city, the harbour and its boats clearly visible. The blue ocean meets sandy beaches in a line of white surf, the beaches stretching as far as the eye can see to the east. To the west, looking out from the other side of the peak, are a range of endless green mountains. I imagined Haiti not too far beyond those ranges. It was quite beautiful.

We walked through the gardens, Juan Jose and Marielle holding hands. I felt a bit like the odd man out and I honestly wished that I could just leave them be and go on with my travels. There’s

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that old saying about visit, or company, being like fish; its good for a few days but then it starts to stink. I'm an independent person, being chaperoned for 3, now 4 days was starting to get to me. I was trying to be polite and smiley, but my face was starting to twitch and cramp from the effort.

On the road...

Juan Jose and I got back in the car. We were going to Jarabacoa.

"Franko, we go to beach? We can have beer".

"Juan Jose, it looks like it's going to rain. I think it's a better idea if we go straight to Jarabacoa"

"It's on the way. We can stop at the beach a little then go to the mountains"

"Okay".

In actual fact, Jarabacoa is inland, about halfway between Puerto Plata and Santo Domingo, a drive of about 2 ½ hours. I didn't know what Juan Jose had in mind but I figured that he knew where he was going.

We drove, the rain starting to fall. We were going east – Jarabacoa was south of Puerto Plata. I looked at my Lonely Planet map again. Heck, I majored in Geography for a year – I know how to read a map. I kept my tongue in, surely Juan Jose knew where he was going.

About 40 minutes later we stopped for a beer in Cabarete. I was already sick of being in the car and almost had it in mind to tell Juan Jose to continue by himself..

"Franko, let's go". Juan Jose seemed almost in a rush.

We kept driving east, Jarabacoa was getting further and further away in my estimation. I couldn't take it anymore. "Juan Jose, this doesn't make any sense. Look at this map. This is not the way to Jarabacoa".

"Franko, this is other way. I like to go this way, it's a little bit longer but very beautiful. Not so far to Jarabacoa".

I looked at the map again. Close to Nagua the coastal road turned inland. From there there is an inland road which turns back to join the main north-south highway close to La Vega. Is that what he had in mind? If so he was basically doubling the distance to Jarabacoa.

We drove on. There were no more towns anymore, we were in the middle of nowhere driving down a potholed road. We passed horse-drawn wagons full of wood and shrub. We kept driving and driving. Somewhere further on we stopped at a place called Playa Grande and stretched our legs on what would have been a beautiful beach had it not been raining buckets. The waves beat the beach, the wind shrieked through palm trees.

Juan Jose drove me crazy. Every 2 minutes he would ask me something along the lines of "Todas es bien Franko?" "You like el Republico Dominicano?" "Mi Broder Franko!". "Si Juan Jose," I would respond, my mind conjuring up different scenarios of how to rid myself of him, like a convict trying to escape prison. Stupid excuses ran through my head but none were convincing – "Juan Jose, I can feel something coming on, and since I was in Asia last year it might be really,

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really contagious. You better drop me off here...” or “Juan Jose, I’m starting to fall in love with you and I’m getting too attached, I know it could never work out between us...” I saw a Caribe Tours bus coming from the other direction and fantasized being on that bus, alone, Juan Jose and this car far, far away. But I didn’t say anything. I didn’t want to be rude. So we kept on going, in silence, getting further and further away from Jarabacoa. This I now knew for a fact. I just couldn’t figure out where we were going. On top of all this, Juan Jose’s driving was atrocious. Firstly, he drove slowly, but from the looks of it you’d swear that he was going 100 miles an hour – sitting straight with his head back, as if fighting the afterburner thrust of an F-16. He somehow managed to make each turn look like an adventure – it reminded me of the Nintendo game I sometimes play “BURNOUT 2: Point of Impact” – Juan Jose fighting each turn like they had magically appeared, along with imaginary school kids and trucks carrying jet-fuel. He would go into the turns heading straight for the ditch, would overcompensate by swerving into the other lane, then realize his mistake by swerving back the other way, the Toyota somehow managing a wheelie at 40 miles an hour. Also complicating things were the potholes. It’s as if he were examining the road 5 feet ahead of the car for any possible crater because he would never noticed anything further ahead. In one instance there were two motorcycles coming from the other direction; two men, farmers it looked, with bundles on the back of their motorcycles. Juan Jose didn’t see them, in fact he turned and went directly into the other lane attempting to detour a couple of potholes. I could see the faces of the two men, annoyance at first, then alarm, then anger as Juan Jose diverted his course at the very last minute. I looked back to see one of the men saluting us with his middle finger. I sympathized and concurred with him.

We had been driving about 3 hours along this coastal road when Juan Jose, out of the blue, announced that we were approaching his hometown of Cabrera. “Franko, close to here is my hometown, Cabrera. I introduce you to my family”. Huh? This was the first time he had mentioned his family or going to visit them. I could feel my blood boiling

We stopped at his family’s house. I met his two sisters and a brother.

“Franko, you want coffee?” asked Juan Jose.

“No”.

It was a short stay. One of the sisters asked us where we were going.

“Jarabacoa” said Juan Jose. She just kind of whistled, the “then what the hell are you doing here?” kind of whistle that confirmed to me that Cabrera wasn’t exactly on the way to the Jarabacoa. “Lots of rain right now in the mountains,” said she.

Juan Jose turned to me, doubt clouding his face. “Franko, you think good idea to go to the mountains? We can stay here tonight and go tomorrow. It’s a long way”.

My face was red, my ears pumping. “No Juan Jose. Let’s go right now.” The light switch in my head was teetering, I could almost understand how people just flip out and suddenly become lunatic serial killers (“He was quiet, a bit of a loner. He kept talking about planes and beer...”)

We said our goodbyes and got in the car. I blew up.

“Juan Jose, you lied to me. I don’t know why you came this way. If we had gone the right way we would already be in Jarabacoa. I’m on vacation and I don’t like spending the whole day in the stupid car. We are closer now to Las Terrenas than we are to Jarabacoa. I want to go to Las Terrenas”. I wish Juan Jose had spoken English because I had many 4-letters words on my mind which I hadn’t managed to translate.

“Okay, okay Frank”.

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We drove on in silence. I still wasn't happy but I cooled down, knowing that we would be spending the night in Las Terrenas. I'd call up David, get really drunk and forget about Juan Jose. Sounded good.

From Cabrera it took about an hour to get to Nagua. It was by then 5 pm, we had been in the car 4 hours. We stopped at a banking machine in Nagua, both of us taking out money. Then the car wouldn't start. We opened up the hood and tinkered around. A small crowd gathered around the white guy and the broken down car. Suddenly, as if by miracle, the car started up. We stopped at a gas station a few minutes later. Juan Jose asked me for money for gasoline, "Not much Franko, we don't need much".

"You might as well fill it up Juan Jose," I suggested.

"No problema," said Juan Jose.

We drove on after Nagua, the sun starting to get lower in the sky. "Franko, we are very lucky to have car. If you had rented a car it would have been very expensive. Very expensive to rent car in Republica Dominicana".

I grunted. I had never asked for a car, getting around by bus and motoconcho was honestly both quicker and cheaper. What, was he warming me up for money?

It was dark by the time we approached Sanchez. I kept my eyes open, saw the gas station that I had seen on my previous visit and directed Juan Jose to take the turnoff for Las Terrenas. The Toyota pattered up the road, straining every meter up the first mountain. Branches raked the car, rain fell and made the visibility next to nothing. "Lights very bad," muttered Juan Jose. He had a point, the car's lights projected a weak pale light in the darkness. We drove slowly. In a few places the concrete had been washed away leaving large potholes, we also had to go around a few felled trees that partially blocked the road. It made me think of scenes from Jurassic Park, the rain and wild jungle all around. "Oh, oh," muttered Juan Jose looking at the dashboard. One look told me everything I had to know. The needle on the gas gauge pointed at empty. Boy did I ever want to kill Juan Jose.

We drove on, up and down the hills. I was looking for familiar landmarks to get an indication of how far we were from Las Terrenas. Both of us kept looking at the needle on empty. I was just waiting to hear that final sputter and sudden silence of the engine. Somehow the car kept on slowly chugging along. I finally saw the lookout where I had stopped previously to admire the views of the north coast. We were close and it was all downhill from here. "You don't need the gas anymore Juan Jose!" We basically rolled down a series of turns for the next 15 minutes, the hills bringing us down to Las Terrenas. We made it.

Las Terrenas (again)

The gas station is one of the first buildings coming into town. We filled up, then I directed Juan Jose to the Punta D'Oro Hotel. It was after 8 Pm. We had spent 7 hours on the road between Puerto Plata and Las Terrenas.

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Peter, the German owner, was happy to see me again. “Back so soon?” said he. He gave us a nice 2-bedroom apartment for the night and I took the larger room. Then I called David; “David, guess where I am?” He agreed to meet us for drinks later at the Paco Cabana.

Juan Jose and I had supper together, the beer going down well. I, of course, paid again. “Franko, Las Terrenas much nicer than Jarabacoa. Very nice here. Tomorrow we rent Passola?” (I had told him about my adventures on the motorbike). “Let’s see tomorrow Juan Jose”. I had other plans in mind.

It was about 10 by the time we walked into Paco Cabana. It was quiet but the pretty bartender, Gladys, recognized me; “Hola Franko, you are back? What are you doing here?” I introduced Juan Jose. It didn’t take long for him to get comfortable, he was soon chatting with a Dominican girl at the bar while I spoke to Gladys.

David hobbled in. I shook his hand, happy to see him, and bought him a whiskey (“Put it on my tab Gladys”). It had been 4 days since I had seen him but it felt like a month.

We were there, talking, when a white woman (a very happy white woman) walked into the bar. She came up to David, “HI! How are you feeling today? You look much better” David said he did indeed feel better, he had just had the leg re-wrapped and the infection was healing nicely. Through all this I was somehow introduced – the lady was from Toronto and she lived half of the year in Las Terrenas. “Cool, that’s interesting,” I said. She looked happy: “Buy me a beer and I’ll tell you all about it!” “Gladys, can you get the lady a beer.” I was in a good mood and feeling generous.

David had moved to the other side of the bar during our short exchange.

The lady starting talking about life in the tropics, about how she couldn’t handle the cold because she had some kind of degenerative muscle disorder. She went on and on about her disorder, talking about shrinking muscle tissue and how painful it was, how she took pills all the time (yuck, I’m pretty squeamish when it comes to bodily functions, show me vomit on the sidewalk and I’ll be tossing up bucket loads of puke...). She showed me her pills. She went on and on, in a louder and louder voice, her voice getting shrill. I started to look around. David caught my eye and made a face. I understood why he was on the other side of the bar. I had to extricate myself from this woman. It was then that I made my blunder.

“Isn’t it bad to mix alcohol with all those pills?”

Well, she just looked at me like I had just killed her favourite pet or something.

“DO YOU KNOW what kind of pain I live with? DO YOU?” She had her hands on her head, looking like she was about to pull out her hair. “You don’t know the constant pain I have to live with, ALL THE TIME. So what if I drink, SO WHAT? HUH? These pills and alcohol are the ONLY THINGS that get me through my day!” Her eyes were popping out and I realized that this woman was totally bonkers. Looney Tunes. Shit.

“Okay, well, I’m going to go talk to some of my friends,” I said.

“SURE. YOU JUST WANT TO PICK UP ONE OF THOSE WHORES! YOU’RE JUST LIKE THE REST OF THEM!” she raved.

“Bye”.

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Holy cow. I went across to where David was sitting, everyone by this time looking at me. “You should have never talked to that fucken wacko!”

“How was I supposed to know?”

David bought me a rum and coke. I was starting to feel pretty good.

“HI”. It was the Canadian woman again. With a big smile on her face. The last time I had seen her she had been sitting by herself looking lonely on the other side of the bar. But she wasn’t addressing me, she was addressing David.

“Look, Frank and I are having a conversation”

“YOU JUST DON’T WANT TO TALK TO ME. WHY ARE YOU SO RUDE? YOU ARE AN ASSHOLE!”

“We are talking. Why don’t you leave us alone?”

“YOU ARE A RUDE ASSHOLE!” She was in tears, spittle was coming out of her mouth.

“WHAT FUCKEN RIGHT DO YOU HAVE TO TALK TO ME THAT WAY HUH? WHAT FUCKEN RIGHT?”

“You are wacko lady, go away”.

She was wacko. She was completely hysterical, tears in her crazy-looking eyes. She couldn’t be reasoned with. “FUCK OFF!” she yelled as she marched off.

It was about 1 am and I started getting nervous thinking about all the drinks that I had ordered. I had bought drinks for David, Honeybuns (who had come asking for a beer) and the crazy Lady. Juan Jose was drinking, on my tab, I surmised. “Gladys, can I have my tab please”. She gave it to me. 2000 pesos. Holy cow! About \$50 US! I only had 1000 pesos in my wallet. I looked at the bill and called Gladys over. 1 drink for David, 1 for Honeybuns, 1 for crazy woman, 2 rum and cokes and 2 Perriers for me, 4 beers for Juan Jose and 3 Pina Coladas for the girl he was trying to pick up. I shot Juan Jose a dirty look but didn’t say anything. “I’ll be back in a minute – I’m going to the bank machine”.

The bank machine didn’t work.

Juan Jose saw me coming back; “Problema Franko?”

“Yes, everyone put their drinks on my tab and I don’t have enough money”.

Thankfully David was there. “Here man, you pay me back tomorrow”. He lent me 1500 pesos. It saved me from a night in a Dominican jail according to Gladys.

Juan Jose must have felt guilty because he offered me a drink. He pulled out his wallet and paid Gladys and I couldn’t believe all the bills, the big bills, that I saw in his wallet. I’m so stupid.

Mr. No More Open Tab

I woke up feeling refreshed the next morning. Not because I had had a good night's sleep, but because I had made some decisions overnight. Time to take out the garbage, time to clean up shop. No more Mr. Nice Guy, no more Mr. Open Tab.

Juan Jose came out of his room, looking a little peaked from our night out. We made a bit of small talk.

“Juan Jose. I've decided to go to Cabarete. I've only got a few days of vacation left and I want some time alone to relax. I'm sure you have work to get back to in Santo Domingo”.

“But Franko, many beautiful girls in Jarabacoa. I thought we go there”.

“No Juan Jose. I'm going to Cabarete”.

“Si Frank. I understand”. I think we both understood.

We dressed and went for breakfast. Juan Jose, looking up from his eggs: “Franko, I told Eduardo that we would change the oil in his car. For him having rented us the car. Okay Franko?”

I knew there must have been some kind of deal made. “How much Juan Jose?”

“1000 pesos” (\$25).

“Okay Juan Jose”. Small price to pay to get him out of my hair.

Juan Jose drove me back to the hotel and packed up his stuff. I walked him to the car.

“Franko, you come back in August next year for my wedding. Marielle likes you. Come back. And this time no hotel, you stay at my house”.

With that Juan Jose got in the car, started up, waved, and drove away. I watched him go, relief slowly washing over me.

The truth about high birth rates

The sun came out about 2 minutes later, the clouds gone, the sky blue. A perfect reflection of my mood. I went to see David in the hotel next door, chatted a bit, and paid him the money he had lent me. I said my good byes. He loved Bush but he wasn't a bad guy.

I then went back to the Punta D'Oro and called Brigido. He laughed hearing my voice and said he would come to pick me up.

Brigido turned up early, “You came back? So soon?” he said smiling. I told him the story of going to Santo Domingo, of meeting up with Juan Jose and going to Puerto Plata. And of how we ended up in Las Terrenas. He laughed, “Your friend was not honest. That is loco”. We threw the backpack into the pickup and drove back through the mountains.

We talked some more. I remarked that Dominicans have many children.

“Si, you know why? Many people here have no electricity and no television. Only one thing to do when the children go to bed – Boom-Boom!” He laughed again. There. I've just disproved all those theories that demographers always advance to explain the higher birth rates in the 3rd

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world. You know, about parents needing all the help they can to take care of the family farm, or about the fear of getting old with no health care programs and nobody to provide for them. No, the truth is that they just want to do Boom-Boom. Maybe that explains why Dominicans are so sexual – imagine if we Canadians had no hockey games to watch? We would be stuck reading. And I'll bet anything that most people would much be rather be doing Boom-boom than doing that.

Cabarete

It was just getting dark when the bus pulled into Cabarete. I was really excited to be back here. Yes, Cabarete was a tourist town, but unlike Boca Chica it has class. It's upmarket without being like all-inclusive Playa Dorada. Cabarete is the closest comparison to some of the tourist towns in Thailand. Nice beaches, classy restaurants, comfortable cafes and bars. It's just a really good place to hang out and relax. That's exactly what I needed after my time with Juan Jose.

I picked up my bag and walked 10 minutes to the Caribe Surf Hotel. The owner, an older Swiss man, recognized me immediately and gave me a great room (\$24/night) with a huge patio. It was great to be back.

I had a nice meal at my favourite German restaurant, then, ready to invade the world (or at least parts of Europe), I went to Las Brisas.

I've said it before, I love Dominican music – merengue and bachata especially. But Las Brisas wasn't very busy when I walked in. I sat down at a small table, watching a few people dancing. A few other people sat at the bar. It was quiet. But it didn't take long for a girl to spot me and come over. Her name was Yanni. She was very pretty, with a fair complexion, beautiful dark hair and a friendly smile. I liked her immediately and invited her to sit down for a beer. I was honest with her too: "I'm not looking for a girlfriend". She was okay with that.

Yanni and I had a couple of beers and talked. She was from Puerto Plata and had a little girl. She had worked in a textile factory (actually I had previously read that the textile industry is big there, there is a "Free Trade Zone" outside Puerto Plata with the same kind of big company sweatshops made infamous in Mexico and Guatemala). But her father had lost his job and she had moved to Cabarete in the hopes of making more money for the family. Another sad story, a typical story.

By 1 am I was tired and ready for bed. I wished Yanni a good evening and went to bed.

Dumajagua Waterfalls

I had booked a tour; a "hiking" tour at the "Dumajagua Waterfalls" near Puerto Plata. "Bring good shoes and a bathing suit" specified the instructions. Cool. We were also going to visit a few artisan things and have a lunch and free alcoholic beverages.

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It was a beautiful morning. At about 7:30 I walked out of the hotel and spotted the large pick-up truck that would take us on our tour. I was greeted by Antonio, a very chubby Dominican man. I got in the back of the truck and sat on one of the wooden benches. We started up, the pick-up heading in the direction of Puerto Plata. Our first stop was on the outskirts of Cabarete, at an all-inclusive, where a German couple in their late-30s got on. The man was a gruff, big-boned man – the minute I saw him I couldn't help but visualize him wearing lederhosen – he looked like the lederhosen type. The woman was blonde with big boobs bouncing around in a bikini top, wearing those plastic sandals with plastic heels. She was the Barbie doll type and I knew she wouldn't get far – I specifically remembered the instructions; “Bring good shoes”. It was a ‘hike’. Twit.

We continued on, driving out of Cabarete, through Sosua and towards Puerto Plata. I really had no idea where we were going. I felt embarrassed sitting in the back of the open pickup truck; locals would turn around and look at us driving by. For the first time on this trip I felt like a typical all-inclusive tourist.

We pulled into the gates of the Playa Dorada complex. It had seemed like weeks ago that I had been here with Juan Jose. Everything was as immaculate; the hedges and gardens, the golf course to the right. We pulled up to a first resort and waited, a couple finally emerging. They were British, in their mid-40s. The lady was a bit chunky, but had a friendly round face and was quick to say hello to everyone. She wore running shoes, athletic wear and a plastic money belt. Her companion looked a bit like a drug dealer; skinny, with lots of tattoos, an earring, and sporting a moustache. But they were friendly (unlike the Germans) and looked prepared for a hike. We waited at a 2nd hotel and I observed the Dominican help. The women looked busy, brushing leaves and flowers off the paths, some pushing carts of laundry. They wore large, billowy dresses designed with big, multi-coloured flowers. Definitely goofy-looking. But they looked happy – these jobs are much sought after in a country with high unemployment. The 3rd couple came out; a young American couple from Atlanta, the guy was a short, chubby, black guy wearing a baseball cap, his girlfriend was a pear-shaped brunette. They were also very friendly.

With everyone accounted for, Antonio started addressing us as a group. The first place we would visit would be the waterfalls. “You will like hiking the falls, my family”.

The terrain to the west of Puerto Plata is beautiful, full of the high, green hills that I had seen from Pico Isabel de Torres. The road wound its way through the hills and over small streams. Two young Dominican men in their early 20's joined our entourage just outside a small town. Both were muscular, one especially so – he was about 6'5 and looked like a weight lifter. Antonio introduced him as “The Machine”. Everyone wanted to know why. “You will find out later my family”.

We continued on before pulling off the main road and following a dirt road until we could go no further. The blonde German woman started complaining the second she got off the truck, the plastic heels of her sandals digging into the mud. We hiked through woods then followed a quiet stream before arriving at a clearing. Before us it lay; the first of a series of waterfalls, the water cascading down about 15 feet into the large clear pool which lay in front of us.

The other Dominican, who I'll call Mini-Machine; “We leave everything here, now we swim in water and climb falls”.

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Nobody had ever said anything about climbing. This was supposed to be a “hike”. The German lady backed out right away, she didn’t want to get in the water.

There were 6 of us left. We took turns swimming across the pool (the water was surprisingly cold, definitely erect-nipple cold) to the base of the falls. From there we had to grimp up the rock face. The Machine was already at the top of the falls, he would extend an arm down, we would grab it and pull ourselves up while climbing up with our feet. One by one we all made it, the 1st fall had been relatively easy because we were climbing up to the side of the gushing water. That wouldn’t be the case with number two.

At the top of the 1st fall was a pool, fed by the river that had carved its path through the rocks. The water was crystal clear and foamed up by the quick-running water. The cliffs on either side were vertical, almost white, rubbed smooth by the cascading river. They loomed high on both sides, only a sliver of blue sky visible through the crack. About 50 feet down the river was another pool, closed off on all sides by the cliff wall. About 10 feet above the pool a torrent of water gushed through an opening in the cliff with the ferocity of a fire hose. That’s where we had to go. I shivered. It wasn’t just because of the cold.

The first part was swimming the 50 feet against the torrent of water. The German started, had difficulties as he neared the pool but, with The Machine grabbing his hand, made it to the far wall of the pool where the overhang of the cliff protected them from the descending water. The British Lady then went, fighting against the current from the outset. Her head came up and water hit her in the face, The Machine grabbed her hand, pulled but couldn’t reel her in. “LET GO, LET GO,” she shouted. He did, she was pushed back downstream and we pulled her out of the water, gasping and choking up water. “I almost drowned!” she protested. I was next; I put my head down, swam as fast and hard as I could, and felt The Machine grab my hand. I had made it. I rested at the end of the pool with the German man, safe from the water gushing from the opening 10 feet above our heads. One by one everyone made it, including the British woman who succeeded on her 2nd attempt.

The Machine left us, Mini-Machine pushing him up above our heads over the rapids. Mini-Machine; “Okay, I push you up, you put foot up cliff, extend left arm, The Machine will grab it and pull you up”. The German went first, Mini-Machine using a foothold, the German fighting the torrent of water. We could barely see him in the water, he was barely discernible – I could just make out his shape and The Machine’s dark arm reaching him. Then his shape disappeared. He had made the falls. The British woman went, she was nervous and shivering. It was the same – but her shape stayed in the torrent for the longest time, there was yelling, and suddenly she flew over us, into the pool about 12 feet from us. Mini-Machine jumped in and swam to her, dragging her head above the water.

She had a cut on the forehead and was very shaken, hysterical. She quit. We waited while Mini-Machine brought her back to the 1st pool. We were down to 5. A nervous 5. This was no longer fun – this was a challenge. This was Fear Factor Dominican Style! Yee Haw!

I was next. The adrenaline was pumping, I was psyched. I’m a competitive person, if the German could make it I could. I wasn’t quitting no matter what. I put my foot in Mini-Machine’s foothold, hoisted myself up, felt for The Machine’s hand and found it. The water was hitting me

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like a brick wall, I grabbed for the cliff wall with the other hand, found a handhold, and with the help of The Machine broke through the water. I had made the 2nd fall. We all made it, except for the British man who lost his grip and shot back into the pool below. He tried again and made it – joining us with blood on his cheek and cut on his knee.

The next levels were similar but a bit easier, swimming against the cold current, hoisting ourselves up falls. We were all game.

“One more fall”. Fall number 7. It was a tough swim against a hard current to the pool at the base of the waterfall. The German made it on his 2nd attempt. The two Americans quit, the current was too strong. I went and swam with all my strength, reaching the pool and making it to the base of the waterfall. I relaxed, then started climbing, using footholds and The Machine’s hand. My foot suddenly slipped under me – my knee struck the cliff and I was underwater, momentarily confused by the bubbles around my head. I popped back up to the surface and tried grabbing something, but the current was too strong and the cliffs were as smooth as porcelain. The current washed me away before I could get my wits about me. I was washed back about 20 feet before I steered myself into a quieter part of the pool away from the main current. I gasped and choked on water. The Machine was searching for me, trying to find me in the water. He saw me off to the side of the pool. I motioned that I was coming again. I took a big breath, gathered my strength, and swam back against the current. I made it to the base of the falls. This time there was no mistake – The Machine helped me up and I made it through the rushing falls. The noise of gushing water here was so strong that I couldn’t hear him – he motioned the next pool where the German was waiting, a perfectly circular pool surrounded by a cylindrical wall of rock. I jumped into the pool and was swept by the current next to him. “Vas Goot, eh?” he shouted. “Yes, it was good”. Wow!

We were the only two to have made it to the last fall. The Machine told us, “Is all, finished, only you two”. The German and I high-fived and made up few “WOOHOO”s. I felt pretty damn high.

Going back down was easier; we lay down on the smooth rock that had been eroded above each fall and we were propelled, as if on waterslides, into the pools below. The last two falls were scarier. We had to jump off ledges into the pools far below. The first jump was about 25 feet high, the 2nd about 20. It was wild.

This is the closest to extreme sports that I’ve ever done and I have to admit it was crazy. It wasn’t “fun”; it was an adventure, it was thrilling. It was also a great boost to the confidence – I wouldn’t have signed up for this tour if I had known what we would have to do. But having done it I felt happy to have experienced it.

I would have suggested, however, that the tour company advertise the visit to the falls for what it is, instead as “A hike in the falls”. We got back to the bottom pool just in time to see a gang of about 10 senior citizens arrive. I remember an old woman in a bikini with blue-white hair and a cigarette dangling from her mouth. They looked at us jumping the 20 feet from the last cliff and just shook their heads and turned around. We all had little injuries, mostly scrapes and cuts. But the English man had a good-looking cut on his cheek and his companion had a big blue lump on her forehead. Someone could have been seriously hurt here. I walked back in the company of

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Mini-Machine who admitted that conditions were dangerous with all the rains of the previous two weeks.

The balance of the morning was spent on the “commercial” part of the tour; we went to a place where artisans had “Petrified wood” carvings for sale (“My family, feel free to buy if you like. Don’t be shy”). Then we went to a farm where we had turns sitting on a big white bull. This was followed by a lunch accompanied by rum and coke. Midway through the lunch the clouds broke open and it started raining cats and dogs.

The last stop was at a place where they made coffee. Antonio; “You can buy packs of coffee for family at home. Don’t be shy”. It was like two totally different tours; one wild, extreme – the other totally commercial. We weren’t the only tour group on this route, we bumped into at least 5 other trucks shuttling between these locations. We were definitely on the beaten path. Someone had brought candy for kids and as we drove along dirt roads from artisan shop to artisan shop the chubby British lady and the Americans would throw candy at youngsters. Children would be playing or sitting next to their houses and suddenly they would have candy thrown in their direction. Which was fine, they looked happy and would pick it up and wave at the truck (I figured that the kids along this route probably had the highest cavity rate in the country). But in a few cases the candy-throwers became too enthusiastic. We passed one house, a family sitting outside having lunch, when suddenly a hail of candy shot out from the truck to land amidst the eating Dominicans. I saw a lady, her hands over her head trying to protect herself from the onslaught of incoming candy. Same thing happened at another house; a man was washing his car, a couple of kids playing close by. Ping! Pang ! Pong! – sweets hailed down on them and the car.

Anyway, it wasn’t a great tour. But I will always remember the “hike” at the Dumajagua Waterfalls.

There are a few kiosks in Cabarete selling tours – I think they all sell basically the same stuff. This tour cost me \$35. Iguana Mama’s is the place for a tour, they are known as the best tour operators in the country – but I found them expensive, as much as \$ 85 US for a day tour. You pay for what you get, but I just found the relative cost very expensive. I’ve heard from other people however that their tours are a blast. I would think safer also.

On the road to Bayahibe

I took the taxi to the bus station in Sosua. The taxi driver was talkative, mentioning that he was also a musician, he played in a band that catered to tourists. He had 4 kids. “You keep your wife busy,” I said. He laughed.

“Not all with one wife, I am married 3 times. I am Dominican !”

“Ah Ha! That’s why there are so many single women here with children!”

He laughed but I could see by the look on his face that he hadn’t really liked my remark.

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I took the Caribe Tours bus in Sosua. I had a long way to go that day; Sosua to Santo Domingo, then Santo Domingo east to La Romana where I would have to catch the flight the following day. I decided that I would spend the last evening in the town of Bayahibe.

The bus to Santo Domingo took 4 hours, after which I hailed down a taxi to take me to Parque Enriquello where the Gua-guas leave for La Romana/Bayahibe. “Why don’t you take the taxi to La Romana?” asked the taxi driver.

“Too expensive,” I replied.

“I can bring you for 1,300 pesos,” said the man.

“If you can do it for 1,000 you can take me”.

“Okay”.

It took about 2 hours of autoroute driving to get to Bayahibe and I have to admit that it was more pleasant than taking the bus. I had the window open, the wind blowing through my hair.

Bayahibe

Bayahibe is described in Lonely Planet as a “Sleepy little seaside town...with its inexpensive hotels and restaurants only a short walk from a Caribbean beach, Bayahibe is what many independent travelers had in mind when they set out for the DR”. Besides Lonely Planet, I had heard other travelers strongly recommending a visit to this town.

I didn’t like Bayahibe. It’s tiny, it’s overrun by tourists (had to go to 3 hotels to finally find a room), and the residents are, relatively speaking, unfriendly. Their small town has been taken over by tourism and I guess you can’t really blame them. Another thing – the beach was dirty. As I had found out on this trip, any beach bordering a Dominican town is dirty. Cabarete, Sosua, Boca Chica, Las Terrenas, and Puerta Galeras had clean beaches, but I think that’s because those beaches are lined by tourist establishments. Bayahibe’s was not. This might sound racist, but Dominicans are not at all environmentally conscious, I can’t tell you how many times I saw Dominicans just tossing objects onto the road or the beach . I walked through the whole town (takes about 5 minutes) and didn’t find any charm or beauty in Bayahibe.

I had a good meal (which took ages to be served because the restaurant was crowded), then walked the town trying to find something to do at night. There was nothing. I went back to my room at 9, read, then fell asleep by about 11.

I packed up for the last time and took the publico to the airport. I met an airport security guard in the publico who asked me what I thought of Dominican women. “The most beautiful in the world,” I said. The reply seemed to make him happy; “I hope you come to the Dominican Republic again.” The publico driver wished me a good flight as he handed me my bag.

I checked in at the airport and got in a very slow moving line. The lady behind me was Dominican, a rich Dominican, who had ended up marrying a Canadian. I told her what I thought

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of the DR: “I think this place is paradise if you have money”.
“Yes,” she replied, “If you have money AND if you don’t have people above you who want to make your life hell. The problem here is corruption”. There was a pause. “But I always feel sad when I have to go back”.

The plane took off. I saw lush hills far below, then a brief glimpse of coastline as we ascended into clouds. A minute later there was only water below.

I always scribble something down when I’m on the plane going home, I find that those initial feelings are usually the most honest and accurate;

I guess it’s time to go back. Don’t feel as sad as last time, also feel that I have completed what I had started – I now “know” the DR and feel comfortable. Accomplished the goal of travelling around this place comfortably. The people are great but the poverty makes me sad. So many sad stories and cute kids. Samana is a place I could retire in, loved it. But for the time being I’ve accomplished the DR, lots of other places to see...but thinking that also makes me sad because I have this place in my heart.

The food is not great (okay), geography so-so except for Samana which is beautiful. Overall the beauty doesn’t compare to Asia, I always say that I’ll take lots of pictures in the DR but in the end it doesn’t catch my eye as much. It really is the people, culture, love of life, cigars, music and rum...that’s why it’s in my heart.

Things have not improved on Hispaniola since I left: the Aristide government in Haiti was overthrown in February of 2004 after months of violence. The place is a chaotic mess with armed gangs roaming the street. Stores, businesses, and even government offices have been looted. International peacekeepers from the United States, Canada, and France have been sent to Haiti looking to re-establish order. The Haitian situation has affected the Dominican Republic – the border with Haiti has been closed in order to stop an influx of refugees. Dominicans are of the opinion that Haiti has to cope with its problems alone and are fearful that the situation may affect life in the DR. Economically, the country isn’t faring any better – the Peso went as high as 55 pesos to the US dollar. At the time of writing (March 2004), the Peso was at 45 to the dollar. Credit agencies earlier in the year also downgraded the country’s debt rating which will also adversely affect the availability and cost of debt. The political situation is also heating up with the upcoming May election – ex-president Leonel Fernandez seems to be the overwhelming favourite to win.

I tried keeping in touch with David but he replies with one-liners when he bothers to reply at all. Last I heard he had found a beautiful chica “22 years old, gorgeous, a 10!” who was taking care of him. He loves retirement in the DR.

Juan Jose called once to say “Hi” and to give me a guilt trip about not having called him in Cabarete. I’m not going to see him again – I really didn’t like his bullshit. I still don’t understand why he took me on that long drive.

I still love the Dominican Republic. Sometimes I’ll put on my favourite Dominican music (I love the group “Aventura”), drink rum, smoke a cigar, and remember the wonderful people I met on this trip. I seem to have a lot of smiles lodged in my memory.

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LATE NOTE: Leonel Fernandez, the president from 1996 to 2000, was re-elected in May 2004 in peaceful elections