

30th October: Kuala Lumpur

Yesterday morning I saw the dawn at 33000 feet. We made the descent towards Singapore six hours ahead of our departure time, after a three and a half hour flight. It was truly magical flying into Singapore over the sea with fleets of boats moored off-shore and the pearly white high-rise buildings of the city. Awesome for me – just about as breathtaking as the Taj at dawn. And the airport – so elegant with marble floors and restroom facilities, a geometric, 3 dimensional, silvery roof-space with the occasional vast wall of greenery. Our cabin luggage awaited us (always a concern with transit) and we found we had a couple of hours to kill – at this end or the bus end. We were helpfully advised, so stayed on site for a couple of cups of coffee and a croissant – the only food we were to have until our arrival at Multiara Oriental Condominium, KL.



There followed a half-hour drive to the Golden Mile Bus Station, the driver keen to offer his services later in the month when we spend a few days in Singapore with Angela. Then a wait in extreme heat for the welcome air-conditioning and comfortable seats of the coach, and the five/six hour drive. (We did have to drag our stuff through official exit from Singapore and two

mins later, into entry into Malaysia.) Met a couple of interesting young men toward end of journey – chap from Singapore who had recently returned from Nottingham, working for Rolls Royce and another English chap – an architect doing a year volunteering for building project for poor here in KL. Arrived in Times Square and straight into taxi for a half hour trip to our destination.



As we arrived the heavens opened driving rain into the covered area and there was Hans, so lovely to see him as we had thought our respective journeying times left that unlikely. We also saw Inge-Marie, but oh so briefly – they were packed and the taxi arrived for them as we entered the condo on the 17th Floor and met Augustian and Monica, both artists, presently living in Bali and Augustian's drawings and large abstracts are all around the condo (compares favourably with the best 5-star hotel one could imagine) – which is spacious and amazing, full of space and art treasures, old and new... and also a deal of technical wizardry. A light bite and then a delicious sleep – much needed after a 32-hour journey! The other famous twin towers are visible in the distance from the balcony (one of several!).

1st November

Yesterday had a relatively easy day. Ventured out with Augustian and Monica just a few hundred metres to a shopping area, every other unit an eatery, mostly Chinese. Had lunch and returned to chill; we need to recover from the rigours of that journey! And we are, we are told, staying in the Hollywood Area of KL and it's certainly just splendid and we are enjoying the lovely space. There was an amazing electric storm at dusk.



So today we went further afield. As I had dropped my camera in the water on our journey down the Rochdale 9 in Manchester, and this will be covered by insurance, we delayed replacing it hoping to get better value for money here. Inge-Marie advised on a Mall just a ten minute taxi-ride away. This place was truly of epic proportions – probably the same size as Milton Keynes but on about *six* levels – we were there for about 4 hours – this included a coffee break and a longer lunch break.

(There are lots of similar Malls here: M&A traipsed thro' a number downtown, yesterday, finding galleries) After a contretemps with the taxi mafia outside the mall, (they wanted double the price that the outward trip cost) we flagged down another taxi and the driver (this time with sat nav) was a delight, speaking English we could actually understand, and charging us the exact price shown on the meter – a touch more than the outward trip ... amazing! We have his card and intend to use him, if he's available, when we need a taxi again. Tomorrow it will be bus and the local transit network; we really need to be more adventurous and go downtown but there are also the trips we are doing from here to organise and that takes time. We are finding the heat and humidity here a little oppressive. Amazing that Hans and Inge-Marie seem to relish it. For the most part we manage with open doors and ceiling fans and resort to the a/c for sleeping! But we *are* slowly acclimatising and able to keep going for longer when we hit the great out-doors! It's strange to awaken to condensation on the *outside* of the windows.(oh the camera also needs a moment to dispel fug!) We are finding our young artists delightful company and this morning Monica told us of her amazing brush with the big C – leukaemia: how she saw a German doctor in Spain having been advised by a passing tourist (an ex-cancer consultant with radical views and advice, who saw her for just two hours, listened and gave advice); a few months later she was clear! Quite a story! The crux of it is that cancer is caused by a previous trauma, the death of a loved one being typical: it is a tenet that, based on our limited experience, we would certainly subscribe to.

Friday: Munti Mews, Georgetown, Penang

Presently sitting on bench (exotic cushions thrown in!) outside our room. This modest yet elegant development is George Town's equivalent of the London Mews – longitudinally off the street and just two storey, recently renovated, once providing carriage space and stables for horses and carriages with staff quarters above – consequently a utilitarian feel but with added elegant touches. We are on the

first floor with a veranda outside the room where green plants mask the dull wall of the building facing us. Meanwhile torrential rain pours down and thunder rumbles around us.



We set the alarm for six this morning and a taxi with a serious Muslim gent drove us thro' increasingly busy KL traffic down town. At the coach depot Nick became



increasingly frustrated unable to find where we could pick up our tickets . . . which we did - finally! It is unsettling when you find yourself the only European in a Malay speaking world ... only those at information booths have English, and we certainly have no Malay! Good thing we were in plenty of time! We boarded bus with 15 minutes to spare! The journey to Penang was much more interesting than our previous journey up from Singapore. Lots more jungle but we travelled thro' quite dramatic hilly countryside, lots more jungle but with beautiful flowering trees and rocky outcrops and a couple of welcome stops, one where we shared a plate of fish curry and spicy cabbage with rice. (they don't offer the fish heads, maybe cos we're European, or maybe cos they are the best bit, reserved for the natives!) Really quite tasty! We were the only passengers deposited at the busy Penang coach and ferry terminal, barely having time to get off before



the coach batted on, Thailand-bound – no wonder there was a bed for Driver No 2! It was only minutes before we were on the ferry taking us across the blue waters towards George Town where we elected to walk through the extreme heat up towards our guesthouse, passing the ex-colonial Customs Building, then heading north: ahead of us, an amazing temple with amazing tenor twelve giant incense wands wafting fumes around, and outside the colourful stalls selling incense, candles and flowers. This is the Goddess of Mercy Temple, dedicated to Mah Cho Po, patron saint of seafarers, in grateful recognition of safe delivery across South China Seas. A request that no incense over 4 feet allowed inside the temple!! so most devotees buy a huge handful of sticks which they light at the sizeable burners outside and waft earnestly and fervently towards the dim altar inside. Then onwards north, the extreme heat, requiring a stop for iced coffee at a place, extremely proud of its coffee, where the owner proudly showed us the ancient stones where once, the coffee was ground. By then we were only a stone's throw

from our guest house where we were welcomed royally, our weather-worn rucksacks taken from us. Our room was delightful, bed one end, couch with TV the other, and arresting black and white tiled bathroom (sadly no piccies of latter two!)



We had a lovely meal – for the most part we elect to have the indigenous food – served by delightful, welcoming staff and really delicious – a Malay salad, chicken curry, rice and bits and bobs, plus beer (30

Ringgits, 6 quid total for the two of us) oh yes .. and ... banana fritters and ice-cream – yum! Nick had the Tiramisu – one of the best he's tasted. Then went for walk around corner to Sam's Batik Emporium, where we have furnished ourselves with extraordinary 'good value for money gear'. Back at our guest house we find our bed prepared and a circle of sweet smelling rose-petals on the cover!

Saturday Penang

Last night caught BBC World headlines – GM summit and lots of straight faces. Went for a walk before breakfast down towards water northwards into grounds of the very grand Eastern and Orient



Hotel and back to the guest house via The Christian Cemetery – bit down at heel (our photo does it justice) and past the beautiful blue mansion, which we made a plan to visit later in the day.

Today, have found myself as exhausted as any day since our extraordinary travels started. Lesson: reduce scope of activities in extreme heat. Incidentally we are 2 degrees further north from the equator than we were in KL. I guess as much is spent on fans and a/c here than we spend on heating in temperate zones. At breakfast I read an article in the Straits Times, beautifully written, with more sophisticated sentence structure than our broadsheets, giving



overview of present issues being addressed at G20 and suggesting that Malaysia balances freedom with greater fiscal responsibility. In this article first learned of protest camps outside St Pauls and. it seems, outside Wall St. How long has that been going on?

So, walk down to Temple we saw yesterday, then turned south to the ‘not to be missed’ Khoo Kongs, a Chinese clan house. An inauspicious entrance (just like our guest house), but within

such sumptuous splendour, mostly reds and golds, under an amazing roof with curves, dragons, whatever! It seems Chinese devils can only fly straight, so all the curvy bits deflect them! Here, five Chinese families set up their temple, business and administrative offices and kitchen, the opera house faces the main building and on Sundays visitors can watch rehearsals for next show. We saw a video of a performance where warriors perform with metre-long sticks, dextrously twirling and manipulating them. So ... this was what we saw a young man practising on the beach, back in Sri Lanka, and jolly good he was too! From there we caught a shuttle bus back to the quay, then walked past the grand ex-colonial buildings and along the sea front (sun now blistering and we gallop from shady tree to next welcome cover, and finally north-west back to guest house, stopping for lunch-time snackette. Then utter crash-out – for me at least, until our scheduled tour of the Cheong Fatt Tze Mansion at three o’clock.

This home was built by a Chinese businessman/entrepreneur and the exterior is a splendid, royal indigo blue. It is built favouring the principles of feng shui, mountain to rear and sloping to water (sea) in front. Although many Chinese features were incorporated in the design, there are also contemporary western features – some very lovely art-deco windows, floor tiles from dear old Stoke on Trent and the delicate filigree wrought-iron, upper veranda, courtesy of Macfarlane Foundry, Scotland. Here Mr Cheong kept his 7th and favourite wife as well as his 4th! (the rest scattered



round his business empire in the Far East) The family, sadly went to rack and ruin in the hapless hands of favourite son of favourite wife no. 7 and was sold. It seems that it escaped the Japanese bombs (pilots apparently thought it was a temple and studiously avoided hitting it). About 16 years ago there were 32 families living in the building along with livestock, motorbikes and cooking apparatus When the one foot depth of muck was cleared from the floor, there were the

undamaged tiles. What remained of the rest of it has been lovingly restored and is graded No.2 on Unesco's list of fabulous homes! It is maintained as a very exclusive hotel, and through the income from the tours. No photos of interior allowed!

Because the hour-and-a-bit tour was standing only, 4.15 found me more than exhausted and a further hour or so of doing nothing was required. Amazingly, no heavy rain! But apart from a meal and a late night stroll in dark through China Town, that was that!

Saturday KL

In an ideal world would have liked to stay on, but because of big Muslim Festival/Public Holiday on Monday accommodation was not possible. We would have given today over to seeing more of island and going up Penang Hill. In fact you need a minimum of 5 days to do this place justice – we've just seen the minimum of what there is in this extraordinary place!





Nick has 'gone native' – he has bought a few bits from Sam's Batik and we had to wait this morning for the tailor to do some alterations. Then the bill was paid and we headed back down to ferry and the long drive back to KL where we arrived at dusk and sampled the bustle, lights, business of downtown KL, a huge night market and discovered we were *not* the only Europeans in KL. In fact we chose an eatery where we were one of many – only most of them were under thirty!

None of the taxi-drivers wanted to bring us back to base (unless we paid well over odds, like 80%) One hapless chap did finally accept Nick's offer of RM30, and it took him an age to get us to our final destination, poor bloke. Nick did give him RM34! One can understand why so few were keen. We finally walked into the apartment about nine and I think we were both asleep by ten.

Monday 7th KL

Yesterday was a quiet sort of 'catching up' day – Nick has now sorted the accommodation for the next stage of our travels. Buses and trains we hope to do as and when needed and hope that works. Apart from a swim at tea time and domestic stuff, that was it! When we *did* decide that it was eight hours since breakfast and unsure whether local eateries were open we raided the cupboards and had pasta, himself grumbling that it was time he had a 'real meal'!

Today we sallied down-town, using bus and the impressive transit system to the Golden Triangle to get a bird's eye view of the KL Twin Towers (7th tallest building in the world as things stand at present) ... very impressive, gleaming under mainly overcast skies but still shimmering. Malaysians be proud! Beneath there is a 4/5 storey Mall with every brand name conceivable – we even came across a Harley Davidson Store up near the top, a few bikes, but mainly fashion gear.

Sadly the art gallery is shut on a Monday but we thoroughly enjoyed the large tropical gardens where we munched on a sarnnie and heard the faithful called to prayer with a beautifully melodic Imman and mass responses. Then a shop for what Nick seems to need – basically English style nosh! So .. we went to a store beneath the twin towers where the best value was a chicken, which will be accompanied this evening by carrots, broccoli and potatoes. I trust that will suit for the next few weeks. We note that eating out is probably cheaper than eating in!!

Back on transit – just a minor detour as we leapt on wrong train going in the opposite direction, but consequently saw a bit more of KL. And now for cooking and preparation for what is probably the most adventurous part of our travels, Cambodia and Vietnam; lots of

travelling with no friends or family for support. We've had some mixed reviews (but mostly positive) from fellow travellers we've met. You will be getting ours in a week or two.

Just discovered our flight out is Wednesday, not Tuesday!! Instant panic for me! Are all our accommodation arrangements (paid in advance!!) also wrong? But no! Just one day adrift from here! Palpable relief! And that means we can do more of KL tomorrow. I'll get the guide book out now. Roast chicken and usual accompaniments was lovely: we ate it on the balcony with Twin Towers on the mid horizon at sunset .

Tuesday

Not every day can be grand: morning no problem; we decided to go down town later, do one or two tourist things and stay for some street food after dark. Things didn't go to plan! I had studied the tourist information and sorted an itinerary and told Nick we had to start off going to KL Central (a central hub, particularly with air travellers) and here things went seriously wrong. The city centre is a nightmare for people wanting to get places. We wanted the National Museum and a highly recommended temple and indeed they were close by on our map, but by the time Nick had marched me every which way, finally refusing to queue for a ticket in order to queue for a taxi (honest, that's the truth – the queue for the queue **and** Nick's pigheadedness!) I was *seriously* fed up and maximo grumpy with **him**; **he** was frustrated and a migraine was threatening. Finally, over a cuppa we decided to go on to Petronas Towers (incidentally the Vienna Boys Choir performed in the concert hall there yesterday) and do the Art Gallery. I was so hot and bothered that, although my head said this was a brilliant idea and just the thing I *should* do; then again, my knees and legs said, 'Take me back home' so this is what we did (yes this is beginning to feel like home – you can get used to luxury!), Nick raising no objection ... on a busy transit system, at the beginning of the rush hour! We now have the evening to sort ourselves for the flight to Cambodia tomorrow after an effort at a Spanish omelette, Malaysian style.

...and after our trip to Cambodia and Vietnam - back to KL

..... and we were airborne on schedule for the three hour flight to KL where Inge-Marie met us and whisked us back to the apartment. Thro' the afternoon we sorted things, looked at our pictures and recorded on computer our memories of Cambodia and Vietnam. In evening went to a Charity Evening organized by two brothers, friends of Hans and Inge-Marie, who are Danes – they have a business in Ghana and run a small charity –Uducaid, which sponsors just three Ghanaians in further education. They know and meet up with the students and the proviso is that, when qualified, the students will adopt another student and oversee their education. The money to fund this effort is made from this one fun and feast day, held once a

year: a squash tournament, supper, presentation, quiz and wine tasting. Danes seem to be 'into' educational philanthropy as a young Thai who was similarly sponsored by a Dane in Thailand, told us the story of how his life, and that of his family had been turned round by a Dane in Thailand. It was an extremely sociable evening – lots of vibrant 30-somethings, mostly Danes but with Iranians, Indians and allsorts!

Sunday

This morning we were taken for an Indian breakfast at a fast food joint nearby and were then driven around the area; the village below to the south is shantyland – a mix of homes and businesses, mostly Chinese, but a few Indians (a temple for each) and Malays – Inge-Marie and Hans are happy to keep it that way as a high rise block would block their view of the city and the twin towers. We also drove around the plush golf course on the other side of the apartments where there were huge villas. We were told that often 4 generations share these places and run up to nine cars!! Yes, even in Shantyland they all have cars, tvs and computers for public transport is limited. Whereas Vietnam and Cambodia were motorbike land, here four wheels are the norm and traffic can be horrendous at rush hour. We both went downstairs for a hair cut – a very different experience from home. Salon not smart at all considering this upmarket condo. First my hair damped and initial cut. Then I was in the care of a youngster who spent 10 mins **vigorously!** shampooing and whatever (no water) – then, for another 15 mins the powerful/pummelling hands worked on my neck and shoulders – a sort of exquisite agony - as more shampoo and oil were added. Then, over to the basin, reclined right back for a face massage with water running down my face – disquieting to say the least, until I relaxed. Final rinse of face and head and a bit more cutting and that was it!! Nick somehow avoided the full works; still not sure whether he was lucky or unlucky. Later in evening Hans did excellent buffalo curry for supper and there was lots of heavy conversation about the world economy, Dr Hans having decidedly powerful views, our businessman and academic at one time exclaiming – 'It's enough to make me become a socialist!'

Monday

Hans and Inge-Marie encouraging us to see a little more of KL dropped us in the Lakeside Park where we visited the largest Bird Park ever, set on slopes with lush vegetation and 200 species, many colourful. Had a bite to eat, visited delightful orchid garden and decided to ride on Hop-on, Hop-Off bus to ensure we had seen all the essential sights in KL. Great for a while ... went past impressive Islamic Arts Museum, through the grandiose colonial district to the very lovely Merdeka Square with central cricket ground (Royal Selangor Club) and Tudor style pavilion, eenormous flagpole where, in 1987 the Union Jack was lowered and that of the Malayan States raised, and on the east side the gracious, mellow brick-built Sultan Abdul Samad building. Further travelling took us around the city where we caught some impressive

views of the Twin Towers and when we arrived at the drop-off point there, we alighted to visit facilities and get cash. That was about 4.00pm ... and from there the day unravelled. We (maybe foolishly) decided to walk to the *next* stop; according to our map it was straightforward enough – big mistake!!! We could see why – *that* stop had turned into a building site. But then again, another 15 minutes (in equatorial heat!) should take us to Stop 5. Getting the picture? By the time we desperately searching for Stop 6 and 7 (and a stop to rehydrate) we were exceedingly jaded, not to say hot and bothered! Nick saw monorail and decided it was time to get 'home.' As we joined the queues to board, an announcement told us of delays. After 20 minutes, when the first train arrived and one unfortunate woman managed to squeeze herself on, we turned tail, and were on the streets again, spotting the rear of a hop-on, hop-off bus wending its way down the street where there *should* have been a stop! In Hop-on despair, we hailed a taxi to take us to KL Central and home. The lesson for all those using the bus: Always, always get on exactly where you alight. Thankyou, thankyou, Inge-Marie for meeting us at the terminal. There followed a calming supper, and a while on the balcony watching that fast, furious and frustrating city from afar!