Expeditions Fund Report 2012- South East Asia

My name is Stefan Williams, and I am currently a 3rd year medical student at the university, what follows is a brief report of the month I spent in South East Asia during this last summer, something which I had eagerly anticipated for the several months that preceded the trip and I am pleased to say that it didn’t disappoint.

We started our journey in Bangkok, Thailand, one of the most vibrant cities in the world. As soon got off the plane we used “tuk tuks” in order to get us to our hostel. I got the sense that the tuk tuk drivers are either people who put copious amounts of faith in the existence of an afterlife, or they are just truly the most careless people that I have ever met as they seemed to hold no reservations in attempting to break the land speed record in a door-less vehicle, whilst getting us half way across Bangkok in seemingly no time at all. It was quite an exhilarating experience to say the least. The next day we decided to go and watch Muay Thai boxing with the locals. It was fascinating to watch this event live as it made me appreciate that this isn’t just mindless violence but there is a substantial degree of mental and physical strength required by the competitors just to hold their own in these bouts. It was also encouraging to see that even after savagely attempting to inflict debilitating injuries to their counterparts, all of the competitors (most impressively the younger generation) upheld nothing but respect for their opponents and this was usually represented at the end by a hug or a handshake.

Whilst at the event, we managed to bump into the Thai Olympic silver medallist from this year’s London games, Kaep Pongprayoon. In a surreal turn of events we found ourselves posing for pictures with the light flyweight boxer and his silver medal in front of the local paparazzi before we decided we best go into the stadium and watch the fighting.

Before leaving Thailand we travelled out of Bangkok to a rural area where we lived in a floating house on the river. During our stay at the river house we climbed natural waterfalls, participated in bamboo rafting and rode elephants. We were also taken to a place known as the “Tiger Temple”, home to a unique variant of monk that claim to have taken in wild tigers and raise them so that they were tame around humans. Despite this confident self-proclaimed attainment of water-tight animal control, they still felt the need to use wrought-iron chains to localise the animals just in case their apparent god-like taming powers ever let the monks down (the monks are probably right to assume that this “fail-safe” tactic would substantially reduce the risk of the frowned upon tourist massacre).

Next we proceeded to Siem Reap, home to one of the ancient wonders of the world, Angkor Wat, in Eastern Cambodia. We rose early in the morning so that we could visit the world’s largest temple at sunrise. It is a guarantee that I will run out of superlatives long before I get anywhere near doing this beautiful sight any justice but what I can say is that I’ll never forget how incredible the view of temple was that morning with the crimson red Cambodian skies providing an impeccably apt backdrop. We spent the next five or so hours taking in the sights of the ancient ruins and asking ourselves how it was even remotely possible for humans to construct such impressive structures so long ago.
Before leaving Cambodia we stopped off at the capital city, Phnom Penh, where we experienced possibly the most emotionally challenging part of our journey. We visited one of the Killing Fields where Pol Pot (the Cambodian ruler during the late 70s) had sent thousands of Cambodian residents to be murdered. Pol Pot’s aim was to transform Cambodia into an entirely self-sustaining nation, however the man was incredibly paranoid and eventually he started mindlessly murdering thousands of innocent people at multiple sites throughout Cambodia. The whole experience there was very intense, and this was exemplified by the field having pieces of bone and clothing from the victims of mass burials rising up towards and penetrating the surface so that there were visible markers of the tragic events that occurred there at the close of the 1970s.

Next we moved into Vietnam where we would spend a majority of our time in South East Asia. We arrived right down south in Ho Chi Minh City and the contrast to the Phnom Penh was marked. The city was a metropolis, with tens of thousands of motorbikes dominating the roadways, hundreds of street food stalls and dozens of high rise buildings with spectacular light displays. Our time here proved to be of great interest to us, as we headed to Cu Chi and witnessed at first hand the intuition of the Vietnamese population as a man who aesthetically and vocally resembled Sebulba from the Star Wars saga showed us their extensive network of tunnels that the local populous had constructed during the Vietnam War. Also what was great about Ho Chi Minh was the number of markets that sold officially branded high quality clothes and bags. This unfortunately meant that in the midst of our journey half way across the world, we began a prolonged quest to find the best North Face backpack in Vietnam (which we eventually and imaginatively abbreviated to simply “a North Face”).

After Ho Chi Minh city, we began our journey north, towards the capital of Vietnam, Hanoi. On our way we stopped at Hoi An, an absolutely incredible place that was possibly the best preserved area of South East Asia that we visited this summer. During the day we rented out bicycles and travelled to the sparsely populated white sanded beaches of the South China Sea where between basking in the sun and enjoying the warm ocean waters we ate freshly caught and cooked fish at the seafront restaurants. By night the majority of the light in the town centre was street lantern derived and as we were walking through the town alongside the centrally running Thu Bon river we were in awe at how beautiful this part of the world was.

So came the time to depart Hoi An and we had one more stop to make before finally getting to Hanoi and this was the city of Hue. Whilst there aren’t an obvious amount of attractions at Hue (apart from the Citadel, a place where capital punishment used to be the standard penalty for unlawful entry), we did manage to take a boat out and visit all of the pagodas along the Perfume River that runs right across the city.

After Hue we began the final northbound stint to Hanoi, and upon arrival, our main intention was to travel to Halong Bay, home to hundreds of towering limestone islets surrounded by warmemerald waters. During our time at the bay we partook in wakeboarding, rock climbing and even high speed tubing all of which were nothing short of
epic. My time in South East Asia reached its climax here as we took our own kayaks out to a remote area of the bay and just lay down on them and embraced the buoyancy that the bioluminescent waters provided us. The feeling of tranquillity that I experienced at this point was immense, with the silence only broken by the sound of birds as we remained buoyant in complete solitude. The situation provided me with the perfect opportunity to reflect and take stock of my journey and it made me appreciate how much I had enjoyed my time abroad.

Finally I would like to thank Queen Mary for the award of the expeditions fund, it was a significant contributing factor in enabling me to go travelling with people that I have known since childhood and I urge anyone with similar desires to apply for the award and do something similar as it truly is an incredible experience.