**Marge and Greg do Bangkok and Indochina**

**By Greg Zell (Nigeria 62-64)**

**Marge Snoeren and I both taught in Yorubaland, me in the big city of Lagos and she in deep bush 125 miles away. Her first Peace Corps year coincided with my second. Given the size of Nigeria, our paths would never cross. We met in DC during the 40th anniversary of Peace Corps. When Marge came to Miami, she guested on our South Florida cable TV series.**

**We both like Overseas Adventure Travel (OAT). Each had been to Thailand and I had been to Cambodia. This itinerary took us to parts of those countries we have not been and on to Laos and Viet Nam.**

**Our tour leader was Anna, a *nom de travail,* adopted by leaders and guides with difficult for Westerners first names usually based on a syllable of their full name. Rightly, her name was Ann but that name was taken so she added an *a.* She was a 5 foot dynamo Thai of Chinese descent but completely Thai. We arrived in Bangkok with no activities planned that day so we asked Anna to book us at the historical Mandarin Oriental hotel for high tea, an extreme indulgence at a reasonable cost. With tea, we each got finger sandwiches on a Christmas tree-like stack of small trays. Neither of us could finish them. We studied the premises and all the photos of famous guests like Noel Coward, Ernest Hemmingway, Prince Chulalongkorn and family (the Crown Prince in *The King and I*)*.***

**We saw the hotel a few days later from a boat on the Chow Praya river, the major geographical feature of Bangkok which natives call Krung Thep. We toured the grounds (no entry inside) of the Royal Palace of recently crowned King Rama X. Next we were off to Ayutthaya, former capital of Siam. The city was sacked and burned by the Burmese which caused the king to move the capital to Bangkok. It was good to get out of this oppressively crowded city of endless skyscrapers with more being built. The country is booming.**

**Some of us met with a young journalist crusading against the military government . We never saw evidence of the military. When they sent a previous prime minister into exile and returned the country to civilian rule, the Thais elected his sister prime minister. She was removed this time around.**

**On to Laos where we met Sean, our local guide. He said, “I am Lao. I speak Lao. My country is Lao. The French told us our county is Laos.” Actually the country is the Lao People’s Democratic Republic. It is usually described as closed society, repressive, communist. We saw nothing of that. Sean said, “We have freedom of speech as long as we say nothing about the government”. We began in Luang Prabang, the former royal capital. In 1978, the Pathet Lao sent the king, queen, and several members of the royal family to a Reeducation Camp. They have not been heard from since. We visited the former palace, or as it is called now, the national museum. We went to a village and school supported by Grand Circle (OAT parent company) Foundation. The second graders were learning English. Sean said we have limited education and health care but it is better than before. In the rather picturesque capital Vientiane on the Mekong River, still faintly French. Marge and I had a delightful dinner at Olive (Oh Leeve, in French) the best restaurant in town. The group took a cruise on the river, one of the longest in Asia winding through all of Indochina.**

**Next, Cambodia and the capital Phnom Penh. (The *h* says the P is pronounced and the word stressed so that the second word almost becomes *pin*.) Our guide was Sun. The people and the language are Khmer. We toured another royal palace. The king is Sihamoni. His father was Sihanouk and his mother was Monique, later Khmerized to M*onineath*. He is unmarried and childless so the crown will pass to one of his 14 half brothers selected by a council of elders and royals.**

**Over the last several centuries, the size of Thailand and the Indochinese countries changed often. Siem Reap, our second stop in Cambodia, is translated *recovered from Siam.* This refers to the massive wat (temple) and other constructions called Angkor Wat. It is a difficult ruin to walk through. I had done it before and so let Marge and the group make their way without me. They also did nearby Angkor Thom and the jungle temple. I have had my fill of temples. Our fine guide was Rath. (The *h* means the *t* is pronounced.)**

**Last stop: Ho Chi Minh City called Saigon by most. What a city it is! HUGE. Traffic, mostly motor scooters. We were told by our guide Mai (My) not to run. A moving target confuses the drivers. They will avoid people crossing gingerly. It helps to close your eyes. I had had it with rice, noodles and vegetables. I made my way to a nearby Argentine steak house for a Porterhouse with French fries. No rice. No noodles. No vegies. Pure dining pleasure.**

**We ended this steamy adventure with a cruise through the Mekong delta. During the Vietnamese named American War, the delta was crawling with commies (Viet Cong) which our guys had to chase down. Today it is rather uneventful. Mai told us her mother was Viet Cong; her father was ARVN (Army of the Republic of Viet Nam). They made a separate peace.**