

In January of this year I was invited to the opening of the new KOTO restaurant, a vocational and training facility for disadvantaged Vietnamese street youth located at 59 Van Mieu St in Hanoi. In September of last year Goddard & Howse held a fund raising dinner for KOTO, which was attended by many of our friends and former guests. On the night we were able to raise almost \$9000, this money going towards the new restaurant and training of two former Vietnamese street youths.

The invitation to the opening suggested that the evening was formal so I had made some concessions to my normally restrained fashion sense and brought along a jacket to go with my jeans. I had also purchased some Italian leather shoes to finish the look. It was a wonderful feeling to be at the opening, not just as a representative of Goddard & Howse but also as a representative of the people of Canberra, our friends and clients who had so graciously donated their time and money to this cause. The evening was a great success with the Australian Ambassador there to do the formalities, a bunch of very excited KOTO kids and many familiar faces from my travels in Vietnam since 1996. The night in Hanoi was cold and drizzling, as it can be in January. By the time I had shuffled between the four floors of the restaurant and walked the dark streets of the Old Quarter with a few KOTO expat volunteers looking for that cleansing ale, my new Italian shoes were causing unbearable pain. The following morning I had a blister the size of a golf ball.

Two days later I found myself in Yangon, hosting our Myanmar Golden Land trip and, happily, I was able to take my shoes off frequently as we wandered the peaceful surroundings of the Shwedagon Pagoda and settled into the plush gardens of the Governors Residence Hotel. I was on my way again travelling in




## The Long Way Home

A taxi ride from Scotts Market, downtown Yangon, to the Governors Residence Hotel at 35 Taw Win Road, is a short ride through leafy streets - or at least it should be. After spending a few kyats (that's Burmese local currency) on some t-shirts and sandalwood Buddha images I decide to head back to my hotel. There are about 20 taxis to choose from, but for some reason I find myself in a 1970's Toyota that sounds like a tank! Inside the interior is falling to bits and it is messy with empty drink bottles strewn everywhere, but I am in, so I am off. There is an elderly gentleman driving and he looks as dishevelled as his cab. He clutches a piece of paper with Burmese writing and has a hazy, beetlenut-induced look in his eye. The men of Myanmar constantly chew the beetlenut, crushed into small pieces, pasted with lime and wrapped in green leaf. They toss the whole package into their mouths and chew, never swallowing, and periodically spitting out the red juice with a flurry and little consideration of their public surroundings. The effect of constant chewing gives the men a red tooth smile, and whatever is in that beetlenut seems to have an analgesic effect, which accounts for the bleary eyes. There is a plastic bag tied to the steering wheel and I suspect it contains everything in the world that is important to my taxi-driving friend. "Taw Win Road" I say. He nods, so off we go.

I have taken taxis many times from Scotts Market where you can buy jade Buddhas, ruby bracelets, gold rings and necklaces, silver ear rings and bolts of cloth. Tall and dark longyi-clad men will side up to you as you browse the shops asking you to change money. Smiling Burmese merchants will call you into their shop with the promise of a cheap price, hoping for the first sale of the day. If you buy something they will take your crisp US dollars or fistful of kyat and brush it across their display

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## The Hoi An Flood

Every year the flood comes to Hoi An, central Vietnam. The rainy season starts here around October, continuing through until December. Thousands of millimetres fall and the odd hurricane blows through for good measure having worked itself into a frenzy in the warm waters of the Gulf of Tonkin. Hoi An is an ancient town located on the banks of the Tubon River and is now recognized as a world cultural heritage site. The river rises in the hills to the west near the Lao border - enormous catchments with no mitigation - the flow gathering during the rain and tumbling into the South China Sea (or the East Sea as the Vietnamese call it). Travellers come from all corners to Hoi An, flood or not, to indulge in a rustic and rural environment. Hoi An was established as a trading port some 500 years ago to service travellers and merchants from China, Japan and Indonesia. The town developed a unique architectural style as visitors from foreign parts set down roots and built houses reminiscent of their origins as they sometimes waited six months for favourable winds to blow them back to their own country. It was an important trading port in central Vietnam until the river silted up about 150 years ago and business moved north to the expansive harbour at Danang. These days when the flood comes, the streets of the old town play host to the swollen waters, sometimes rising two metres into the old houses, the water reaching its high water mark quickly and staying for three days.

When the water is high the locals move upstairs. Furniture, clothing, the dog and cat and all the family wait it out. Access to and from the house at these times is by boat, paddling along the swamped streets - people standing and chatting to their neighbours. Shops are still open; the only holiday for most people in Vietnam is during the TET New Year celebration when everyone has a rest. There are over 360 tailors in Hoi An - they tout their goods and services with pretty girls dressed in the flattering au dai (traditional Vietnamese dress) standing invitingly



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**Price:** \$3999 pp twin/double, plus taxes of \$375 pp  
Add \$800 if you are travelling as a single.

Book now and beat the price rise. As much as we would like to keep our prices the same forever, the ramping economy in Vietnam means that all of the prices must go up in 2008. Any booking we receive until the end of this year (2007) will beat the price rise, so if you have been contemplating a trip now is the time to book. From August onwards we have upgraded our hotels (once again) to the Sofitel Metropole in Hanoi, located in the heart of the French Quarter, and the Continental Hotel in Saigon. We have also included the new Sofitel property in Hue 'Le Residence' - a fully restored French villa by the banks of the Perfume (Huong) River - as our first choice hotel.

#### BURMA - THE GOLDEN LAND (17 DAYS)

**2007** October 21 and November 19.  
**2008** March 20.  
**Price:** \$5850 pp twin/double, plus taxes of \$425pp  
Add \$1000 if you are travelling as a single.

I first travelled to Burma in 2002 and since that time there has been a steady increase in the number of enquiries and bookings

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Southeast Asia, and it was the beginning of a travel experience that took me to Hanoi, Myanmar, back to Vietnam for six weeks, and then finally back to Myanmar and along the Burma Road to Zhong Dian in lower Tibet.

In Yangon we threw water at each other to celebrate the Burmese New Year and dropped in on a Shan wedding where our small group of western travellers upstaged the bride and groom. We soaked in the mud baths at Nha Trang and sat on the floor at Highway 4 restaurant in Hanoi where we sampled wines made from gecko, ginseng and bumblebee, and sipped the dreaded "five times in one night". In Saigon we scrambled into Ngon restaurant to eat street food and drink beer, then strolled back to our hotel in the balmy atmosphere of a Saigon night. On the bus, cashews, coconut candy, ginger and endless bottles of water were consumed. On the road between Tenchong and Dali we saw giant highways being built by the Chinese across the Salween River, a super highway to the Burmese border.

In Leijiang we sat in the rain - that later became snow - to see "Impression Leijiang", an unforgettable outdoor cultural performance depicting the life of the Naxi people (directed by Zhang Yimou). On the Irrawaddy, we relaxed on the sundeck of the riverboat RV Pandaw and contemplated why everyone was in such a hurry.

Travel provides us with endless images and memories; it gives us tangible experiences that will stay with us long after the plane has departed or the bus has driven into the distance. We will sometimes find new friends and forge relationships with local people that cross all the boundaries as we encounter original people living original lives.

I find myself back in Australia - my Italian shoes now very comfortable - and we are preparing for the next season to Southeast Asia, which will see us operate a Vietnam trip every month from August until April next year - some months we have two trips. We have welcomed Eloise Bailey as a tour leader and, along with Paul and Nadine, I think we have the best and most experienced guides available. In the office you will also meet Catherine and Cheryl who do their best to clean up after me and keep the ship running smoothly. We head back to Burma in October and November and into Laos and Cambodia, and our Old Burma Road trip is scheduled for April 2008. Full details are included in this edition of East.

Thank you again to all those who supported our fundraising efforts last year, and to all of you who refer Goddard & Howse to your friends and relatives for a travel experience in Southeast Asia. We appreciate your support very much and I hope you can join us again sometime in the future. In the meantime, enjoy the moment!

*Ross Goddard*

cabinets, muttering to themselves "lucky money". If you have been travelling around Burma for a month and missed out on buying that treasured item en route, you can usually make up for it at Scotts Market.

The journey is taking longer than I remember - the landmarks are familiar but I get the feeling we are not going in the right direction. The Toyota has a deep throaty engine that rumbles through the gears, and there are mirrors on either side of the front guards which make the vehicle look quite imposing. My driver friend speaks no English so there is no conversation. I find myself near the Savoy Hotel on Dahamazedzi Road and I know we are a long way from my hotel. If my elderly driver turns right here and into Inya Road it will lead us north from Yangon and I may finish up in Mandalay! I resolve to show him the hotel card. He looks at it vaguely, sort of nods, turns right anyway and motions ahead with his hand. I suddenly realise that my ageing Burmese taxi friend cannot read - whether it is Burmese or English. In fact he can probably barely see and probably lost the good part of his hearing a few years ago.

We are rattling along Inya Road, heading north, so I ask him to stop by waving my arms and pulling all sorts of faces. He gets the message and we pull up next to a couple of young lads out for a stroll. Many Yangon residents can speak English, particularly the younger ones, so I take my chances and show them the hotel card. They indicate to the driver we are going the wrong way so we turn around, my blind and illiterate taxi driver doing his best to reassure me that we are now on the right track. At no stage was I really that concerned about my safety or even the intentions of my taxi driver - Burma is a safe place and Yangon is a safe city, at least when compared with some other cities in the world. We head back down Inya Road and come to the turn where the Savoy Hotel is, and that's enough for me. I suggest we call it quits and I pay him 2000 kyat for his trouble - this is about \$2 and the standard price for a fare just about anywhere around Yangon. I say thanks, but he has got no idea. I wonder afterwards where he thought he was taking me - maybe just for a drive so he could get some money. I don't think so. There is a hotel on the Inya Road built by the Russians in the mid-eighties and still popular with tourists; I had even stayed there on my first visit many years ago. So I resolve that this was probably the only hotel he knew, and in the absence of not being able to read, with very average sight and just about being deaf, I probably did well to make it as far as I did! I ask the door staff at the Savoy Hotel to get me a cab to the Governors Residence Hotel, and twenty minutes later I am in my room.

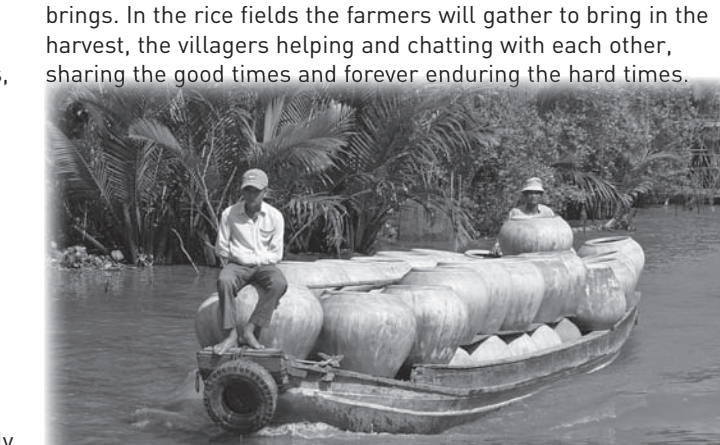


outside shops, flashing smiles and gossiping to each other as you walk or paddle by. One thing is for sure - if you take the bait and enter a tailor shop to browse or maybe buy just one shirt, it is almost guaranteed that you will walk out with five shirts, two pairs of pants and a jacket!

Flood or not, business continues. It seems to be a Vietnamese constant. The local cafes adjust their menus according to the slow down in supply and invoke "the flood menu", as it is known at this time. In fact it is generally hard for the restaurants and locals to get fresh food. The market, a life source of Hoi An and most rural Vietnamese towns, is closed or at least very limited in its available produce.

During the flood, people who live on the river or by its banks suffer terribly. Their impoverished lives placed under even more strain with water rising on all sides. Some people live on their small boats or sampans, perhaps just six metres long with a rounded bamboo roof across half of the boat - modest protection for families of sometimes five people. During the day, old women in tattered conical hats and tunics will press for business along the riverfront, offering tourists a ride in their sampan for a dollar. They smile broadly showing off black teeth and faces full of wrinkles that could probably tell a thousand stories of French occupation, the bloodshed of the American war and the hardship of the "subsidised times" when a coupon was all you could use to get food. If you lost this coupon you went hungry. During the flood these old women still look for business, even though the river has burst its banks and filled the streets. They stand on the edge of their boats, which are moored to a clothing or souvenir shop, pleading with you to join them. In the background you can see the swollen Tubon River raging just 50 metres away.

After the flood it is remarkable how quickly the town restores itself. Where streets were flooded, debris scattered, buildings damaged by hurricane winds and trees uprooted, the town will return to its peaceful calm in the blink of an eye. Hoi An is a Vietnam oasis; away from the insensitivities of Hanoi and its sunny cousin Saigon, the people here are simple and uncomplicated. They eat the same food every day. They plant two crops of rice every year and watch it grow green and tall until it husks and browns to golden straw that sweeps across the paddy field. The pace is unchanged, despite the changes that tourism brings. In the rice fields the farmers will gather to bring in the harvest, the villagers helping and chatting with each other, sharing the good times and forever enduring the hard times.



on this trip. The journey visits Yangon, Inle Lake and Mandalay, and discovers the temples of Bagan. This trip gives us a chance to meet the gracious people of Burma and Shan State and to learn about their diverse culture and the customs of this timeless country. This journey has wonderful accommodation, including the Strand Hotel, once boldly described as the "best hotel east of the Suez", a few nights on the Irrawaddy travelling by riverboat, and by the shores of Inle Lake we will stay in absolute comfort at the Inle Lake View Hotel.

#### THE OLD BURMA ROAD (19 Days)

**2008** April 13.  
**Price:** \$6400 pp twin/double, plus taxes \$425 pp  
Add \$1000 if you are travelling as a single.

This journey has highlights every day. We begin in Yangon at the time of the Myanmar New Year to celebrate the Thingyan Water Festival, spend time on Inle Lake then rest for a few days at Maymyo the old British Hill Station before taking the local train to Lashio. We travel through upper Shan State, the land of the Trouser people, reach the border with Yunnan and cross into China at the remote trading town of Ruili. We follow the old Burma Road to Tenchong, across the Salween to Dali, over the Yangtze in Tiger Leaping Gorge, and into Tibetan culture at 13,000 feet in Zhong Dian. This is the road less-travelled, and expect to meet indigenous people living original lives in the most beautiful surroundings.

#### NORTHERN THAILAND, LAOS & CAMBODIA - THE LAND OF A MILLION ELEPHANTS (18 Days)

**2007** November 19.  
**Price:** \$5500 pp twin/double, plus taxes of \$425 pp  
Add \$850 if you are travelling as a single.

This journey is a favourite that takes in three countries and uses a variety of transport and accommodation. In Laos we travel by slow boat down a remote stretch of the Mekong River, visiting villages that rarely see western travellers. We rest in Luang Prabang and enjoy delightful Lao cuisine before driving over the hills to the Plain of Jars. In Cambodia we will stay at the Amanjaya Hotel with a view of the Tonle Sap, and drive through the Khmer countryside to the Temples of Angkor. This is another wonderful journey of discovery.

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