

Complimentary review edition!

RICE CRUST

FROM THE BOTTOM OF THE POT



A Journey Across South East Asia

**PARRY
LOEFFLER**



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conclusion

I originally wrote this as a conclusion to the trip, but after some thought, I figured it might not make a bad introduction. The great thing about this whole project is that I'm the author, so I can do whatever I want, and with that, I've gone against tradition and decided to stick my conclusion at the beginning of the book! Enough explaining—here it is. Enjoy.

“I feel that the experiences—the adventures—that I have collected over the past three months cannot really be fully conveyed by what I've written on paper, no matter how colorful my language, or how skillful my writing. It's really beyond words, or even storytelling. The days unfold before you, like the unrolling of a richly-colored fabric from its spool, the colors sometimes flowing together in harmony, sometimes clashing and with no recognizable pattern for you to grasp onto.

Perhaps you've had to listen while a friend has practically gurgled with excitement as they told you tales of their adventures beyond the hotels and resorts, to a land much rawer than your own, with only the possessions they could carry on their back. Maybe you've understood and listened with interest, or maybe you've felt like rolling your eyes, wondering what all the fuss is about, and shrugged off their seemingly life altering experience.

But the impact upon them is very real. On a trip like this, your emotions can be overwhelmed and your senses challenged with strange sights, smells, and exotic tastes, sometimes to the extent that you tire of it and just want to go home. But those periods are usually brief and vanish quickly, washed away by some new, fantastic experience that leaves you refreshed and once again clawing onward for more.

You cannot help but be closely touched by the people and their diverse cultures, whether you are seeking that or not. You will learn about them and their history, and you will feel the pain of their tragedies and the joy of their victories. Your heart will bleed for the horrors that their country, their home, has gone

through—from the terrors of the S-21 prison and Killing Fields of Cambodia to the lingering reminders of the Vietnam War.

You meet fantastic people who will never be forgotten; people who will go out of their way to help a traveler, to be a friend in a strange land, and to make you their guest. Just friendly neighbors, half a world away.”



The Intense Road To Mae Hong Son

Mae Hong Son

October 17

Today I woke up and heard Mae Hong Son calling my name. It's a bigger village about four hours west, near the Burma border.

I feel kind of sad leaving Pai since it has been so good here, and I know I will miss Heidi. I've spent only a few days with her, but know she's a great girl with a kind heart.

I got on the 10:30 A.M. bus—it was so packed that I had to share a row of seats with two Thai girls, the three of us crammed on the two tiny seats. The fan above us wasn't working, and the day was already heating up. As cute as they were, I figured four hours like this would be unbearable, so at the last moment I decided to get off and wait for the noon bus.

Well, noon came and went, and it was about 1:45 P.M. before the bus finally rolled in. I climbed aboard and found I was the only Caucasian on it, but I thought it was worth the wait since it was a bigger bus and all the fans worked. My enthusiasm soon dwindled, though, when the bus lurched, sputtered, and jolted its way out of the bus station. What a piece of crap!

This 'highway' is known as the most rugged in Thailand, carving its way through the mountains and over a very high summit ridge. The bus almost didn't make it—seriously. There were sections of steep road to the summit where it slowed right down, and with a sputter and final jarring jolt, stalled to a stop. I thought we blew the motor or fell into a giant pothole, but the real story was that the bus just didn't have enough power to make it up the steep mountain road.

Their solution: two guys jump out and put some wood blocks behind the back wheels. The driver then starts the engine, revs it up until you think it's ready to explode, then quickly slams it into first gear, lurching us forward a few meters before jolting and stalling again. Immediately after it stalls, the two guys outside rush to move the wooden blocks under the back tires again, holding the bus in its new position.

The process repeated. And repeated. And repeated. Finally, we got to the top of the hill where the road flattened out and the bus could chug its way onward!

Later, as I was writing in my journal, the bus suddenly screeched to a halt again. Shaken, I looked up to see we were making our way back down the mountain and were part way

through a hairpin turn. I stared wide-eyed out the front windshield at the plummeting drop over the side of the mountain in front of us. The turn was so sharp that we'd gone part way into the oncoming lane, and the driver had stopped to regain control! Some of the Thais were laughing, but their culture dictates laughter for the good and bad, the embarrassing, and even the tense—showing any anger is something they rarely do. So, I'm not really sure if they were scared shitless, like me, or truly just enjoying the ride! Ah, but the biggest shock was yet to come.

We'd stopped at a small village for a rest break. A few minutes had passed and I figured I should really go to the bathroom. I made a dash across the road to the gas station as quickly as I could.

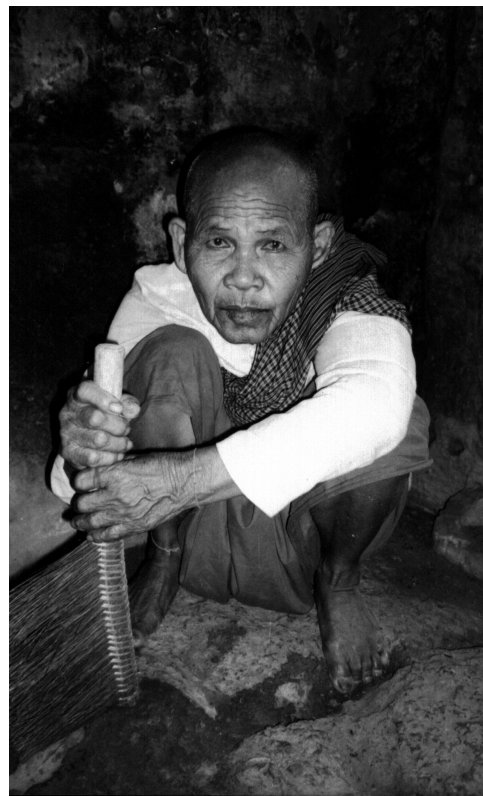
I came out after doing my business, and the roadside looked strangely empty. My brain realized what was going on in a split second, and I ran out just in time to catch a last glimpse of my bus rolling down the road, taking my backpack with it!

I waved frantically, running down the road in a futile chase. Not sure if they'd seen me, I immediately turned my attention to some guys at the side of the road with motorbikes who looked to be just hanging out. They saw my predicament and said excitedly, "20 Baht! 20 Baht!" Waving excitedly in agreement, on I jumped and the chase began.

Luckily, the bus had stopped. There was one other Caucasian guy aboard who realized I wasn't there and apparently started yelling, "Stop, *farang, farang!*" (Stop, westerner, westerner!) when he realized I wasn't there.

I'm beginning to realize that a trip like this unavoidably changes you as a person in many ways, some of which I've already experienced, some of which I suspect I've yet to discover. Meeting so many people, both fellow tourists and local Thais, dealing with the cultural differences, the climate, the language barrier, and simply being the minority for once inevitably has an effect on you.

You face all of this with nothing but a few precious and familiar belongings on your back—that is, unless they're rolling down the highway on a bus while you frantically chase after them with your pants half down.





Into the Unknown—The Road To Vietnam

Vientiane

November 1

The first part of the day was spent lounging around, waiting for our 6 P.M. bus to Vietnam. I did venture out for two hours in the blazing sun looking for a market rumored to sell fruit, but only found street vendors quoting as high as C\$20 for a dozen bananas! Thankfully, I did find some vendors selling at a more reasonable C\$2.

When 6 P.M. rolled around, we boarded a small mini-bus and started out east towards the border of Vietnam. The bus was only half full, with maybe a dozen people, and Carl and I were the only Caucasians. It appeared that about five of the Vietnamese on board (we'll call them the 'Group of 5') knew, or worked with, the driver and the rest were just passengers like us.

At about 10 P.M., nearly everyone was asleep. I suddenly felt the road get much bumpier, as if we'd left the highway and were on a side road. I got up and looked out the window, but it was completely dark and I could only make out the shapes of some small shacks, my eyes still blurry with sleep. We pulled into a driveway and the Group of 5 got off the bus and began talking with a young boy peering out of the open second floor window of a shack. After a minute, two large doors on the ground floor swung open and the guys started hauling these large sacks, about one-meter square and a half-meter thick, over to the bus. At first they intended on strapping them to the roof, but for some reason changed their minds and attempted to jam them into the bus with us. The sacks were just too big, so they broke them open, revealing dozens of smaller, black plastics bags filled with something quite soft.

They began tossing them in through the windows, and things started to get tight as they filled every nook and cranny available. They tried to take Carl's pack out the window to strap it to the roof, but he held on, flatly refusing. They eventually filled the entire back seat of the bus, almost to the roof. Unfortunately, that had been Carl's seat, and they just expected him to lie on top of it all!

I was feeling a little uneasy about what kind of bus trip required five staff members, and what sort of cargo they were picking up from a shack in the middle of the night, in the middle of nowhere. I asked Carl to poke around a bit in a few bags once we got moving. I could hear him rustling around in the dark once we were on the road again, and he whispered that they felt like they might be stuffed full of fabric. Or they might not.

Our options as to what we could do, even if we wanted to, seemed pretty limited, so we decided to just let things be for the time being. I'm really not sure whether it was the decision I was comfortable with, or an admission that other options like getting off of the bus into the darkness of night would be equally as uncomfortable. I tried to tell myself that everything was fine, but at about 1 A.M. things got a little stranger.

We've just stopped again at another shack on the outskirts of some small town. My watch says 1 A.M. The Group of 5 are chatting in Vietnamese to the other passengers, I think asking them to get off the bus for something to eat. They motion to us, but we say we're staying on board, along with one lady and her child.

They've started up the bus again and are driving to the other side of the road and parking, about seventy-five meters away from the shack.

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A couple minutes have passed and we're now stopping beside a river in a valley between two small hills, very much out of sight from any surrounding shacks. The Group

of 5 are starting to pull all of the small plastic bags out of the bus. At first I thought they were laying them on the ground outside, but it appears that they are putting them up on the roof. Perhaps they are just using the spare time to rearrange things and make more room. It seems strange that they've driven a kilometer to this remote and hidden location to do it, though. I can hear them up on the roof doing something with wrenches now.

A voice inside my head is progressively getting louder, telling me that something about this is not right. I'm getting a little worried. In fact, I'm wondering why I haven't emptied my bowels a couple times already. Come to think of it, maybe I have, but my mind and body feel kind of numb, almost as if protecting me from whatever the reality of this might be.

It has been about thirty minutes and they seem to be finished. We're now driving back to where they dropped the other people off.

We've made it back, and the Group of 5 have gotten off the bus again, turning off all the lights, leaving Carl and me with the lady and her child in the darkness. Carl went out the window to check out what they've done on the roof, but to our astonishment, he found that it's completely empty! There's nothing up there. It seems they've put, or perhaps hidden, all of the bags underneath the roof of the bus.

This is really strange.

It's pitch black inside the bus, pitch black outside, and we're not sure exactly where we are or how long we'll be here. It's now about 2 A.M....

This is a sample of one of the delicious recipes in the book. Enjoy.

Fried Beef/Chicken with Green Pepper and Lemon Grass

From Cambodia

Serves 2

Ingredients

- 2 tablespoons oil
- 4 cloves garlic, minced
- 2 chicken breasts or some beef, sliced (about 2 cups)
- 1 green pepper, sliced
- 2 tablespoons fish sauce
- 1 tablespoon sugar
- 3 tablespoons lemon grass, minced
- 2 tablespoons peanuts, crushed

Method

Put the oil into a heated wok, add the garlic and fry it for a minute or two until it starts to brown. Add the chicken and cook until it's nearly done. Add the remaining ingredients, cooking for a few minutes until well heated. Serve over a bed of Thai scented rice.



Parry Loeffler knew he needed a change. So he locked up his house and left everything behind except for a change of clothes, setting out on an adventure to South East Asia.

Follow along on his journey as he explores the ancient ruins of Angkor in Cambodia, encounters unusual foods like Barbecued Frogs on a Stick in Thailand, and takes a harrowing road trip from Laos to Vietnam through a remote mountain pass. Join him as he comes to know the fantastic people of these countries.

If you've been there, this book will bring back some vivid memories.
If you're planning to go, it will give you a flavor for what is to come.
If you're one that is content to sit back in a chair and just read about it, *Rice Crust from the Bottom of the Pot* will take you there.

Also, try cooking authentic Vietnamese, Thai, and Cambodian cuisine using recipes that come straight from the kitchens of South East Asia!



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TRAVEL / ADVENTURE