

# *Hong Kong to Singapore via Vietnam and Thailand*



*November 2024*

*Bob and Molly Hillery*

## *Southeast Asia, November 2024*

*This would be our sixth or seventh visit to Southeast Asia and would take us to several places that we have enjoyed in the past and a couple of new experiences in Vietnam. We started by spending five days in Hong Kong, after which we took a 13 night cruise that sailed to three locations in Vietnam and two in Thailand. The cruise ended in Singapore where we would spend another five days before returning home.*

### **Friday November 8**

Our Uber driver arrived at our condo a few minutes before 6pm to drive us to the airport Marriott. Friday evening traffic was heavy on I-71 as far as downtown, after which it cleared and we made good time for the final ten miles. We checked into the hotel around 7pm and immediately went down for dinner in the hotel restaurant. The meal was surprisingly good (salads and a shared pizza) and we returned to the room before 9pm. We watched TV for a little while and then turned in for the night.

### **Saturday November 9**

We got up at 5:45 and took the 6:15 shuttle to the airport. It was far busier than we had expected but the lines moved quickly, and we reached the gate well before our boarding time of 7:20. The flight left the gate on time at 8am but then sat on the tarmac for over 45 minutes due to fog delays in Atlanta. We arrived about an hour late but were able to walk at a leisurely pace to our connecting gate on the next concourse. Our Korean Airlines flight to Seoul left on time at noon, after which we settled in for a 14-hour flight.

The first meal was served soon after take-off and we both enjoyed the food and service. My traditional Korean meal of bibimbap was very good, as was the wine! After lunch, we napped for a few hours as we flew west over the United States and into Canada and Alaska. The seat belt sign came on a few times but the flight on out B747 was generally smooth.

About half-way through the flight, we crossed the Bering Sea and avoided Russian airspace. In fact, we didn't fly over land until we crossed the big island of Japan north of Tokyo. We had been flying in daylight ever since leaving Atlanta, but the cloud cover was such that we got only very rare glimpses of land. One of those was of the coastline and snow-covered mountains of Japan – but this didn't last very long, and we were in thick cloud once again.

About 2 ½ hours out from Seoul, we were served another hot meal which was also very good. I had been expecting this meal much earlier in the flight and had resisted sleep to be sure I was fully awake for it. However, the late arrival of the second meal meant that I didn't sleep as much as I might have – but, as we approached Seoul, I felt reasonably rested after almost 15 hours in the air.

We arrived in Seoul just as it was getting dark – and just as several other international flights had landed! The walk to Immigration was very busy and we already felt pleased that we had almost 2 ½ hours before our onward flight. This was further intensified as we joined the long, snaking line that led to a security checkpoint and no amount of cane waving or feigned tiredness persuaded the officials to allow us through the “special needs” line. Oddly enough, I had read recently just how welcoming Incheon airport was to visitors (one of the top few in the world) but I could only assume that the grade was based more on shopping, entertainment and food than efficiency at moving thousands of people between gates.

Nevertheless, we eventually passed through the baggage check and walked the remaining mile (?) to our new gate and arrived about 15 minutes prior to boarding. This flight to Hong Kong was also on Korean Airlines and, once again, the onboard service and meal were excellent and the 3 ¼ hour flight went very quickly.

In Hong Kong, getting through Immigration and Baggage Claim went very quickly and smoothly and all that was now left was to get a taxi to our hotel. In a city known for its efficiency and hi-tech, this simple process turned out to be a mini nightmare. First, there were taxi lines for several different areas of the city and the New Territories, and we wandered a little before be-

ing directed to “our” line. Taxis came and went quickly (efficient Hong Kong) but it wasn’t until we were loading ours that we found out that they only accept cash – Hong Kong Dollars only! Of course, we didn’t have any, so we returned to the building in search of an ATM, or an alternative form of transport. ATMs were not abundant (or perhaps just not obvious) so, after more wandering and discussions with airport staff, we decided to take the airport express train into town and the hotel shuttle from the station (we had done this several times in the past and it had always worked well – we just felt like pampering ourselves this time with a direct taxi!)

Once again, the first train ticket booth I found was “Cash Only” so I went in search of an ATM. Oddly, I asked at another ticket booth as to an ATM location and was told that I could buy a train ticket here with my credit card. Hallelujah! Mission accomplished – and we just made the second-last train of the night.

At Hong Kong station we went directly to the hotel shuttle pickup point, only to be told that the last one had left for the night so we must use a taxi and (you guessed it) they only accepted cash. Fortunately, ATMs here were plentiful, so I quickly retrieved some local currency – and ten minutes later we were at the JW Marriott, where we were warmly welcomed. At this point, after 30 hours on the road and the past hour of difficulties, while a warm welcome was nice, all we really wanted was a room, a shower, and a bed!

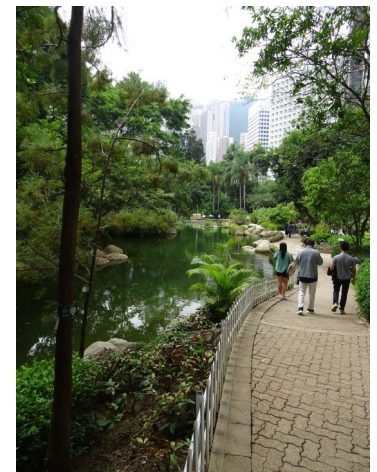
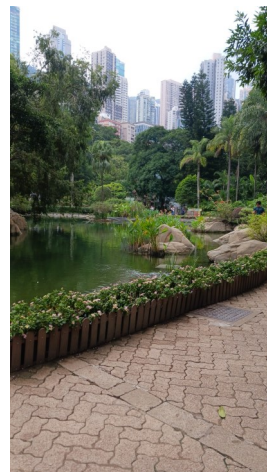
At 1:30am Hong Kong time that was exactly what we got! It had been a long and interesting birthday for me.

### ***Monday November 11***

We were up soon after 9am and awoke to an overcast day which was forecast to improve and there was to be no rain. We had already decided that this would be a lazy, “recovery” day so we had a very leisurely breakfast in the lounge and then left the hotel for a few hours. Our first stop was at the Underground station (“MTR” in Hong Kong) where we purchased our Octopus card pre-loaded with money for future transportation across the entire region. Once again, cash was needed to purchase the card but (if past experience holds) any top-up will be done using a credit card.

At this point, my curiosity as to why Hong Kong (of all places) appeared to be headed to an all-cash society got the better of me and I did a little Googling. The consensus seems to be that the older population is not so hi-tech (certainly plausible) and there is a more general fear of the Big Brother effect of Apple Pay or the like – which is clearly favored by the younger set. Use of a credit card in the normal manner (“tap”, PIN, or signature) which would seem a happy medium is still used but apparently not as popular as the two “extremes”. It certainly seems odd in this advanced society, and we do not remember it being like this on previous visits. Is there an increasing Mainland China influence?

Now that we were ready to travel and felt a little more comfortable with the “rules”, all we did for the rest of the day was walk! The underground station adjoins a huge shopping mall (very up-scale) and – with a series of climbs to higher levels via escalator – eventually opens into Hong Kong Park. This is quite literally a beautiful oasis in the middle of the city, with koi ponds, waterfalls, beautiful flower beds and exotic trees masking almost completely the growing number of office blocks and residences that climb skyward at almost every corner.



***Hong Kong Park—an oasis in the middle of the city***



We spent a very pleasant two hours strolling and sitting in this park and watching the locals and tourists enjoy the scenery and a pleasantly warm day. We followed this by a late sandwich lunch (the mall has many restaurants) before returning to the room to catch up on a little sleep before our dinner reservation. We had

made a reservation at an upscale (Michelin Star) Chinese restaurant in the hotel which we have enjoyed in the past and at which we were looking forward to our Classics Reimagined tasting menu.



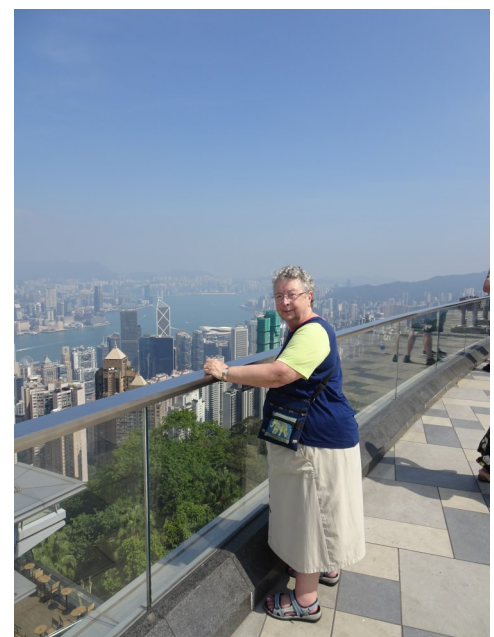
Once we entered the restaurant, we had second thoughts as to whether or not we had eaten here before – or was it the hotel in Singapore. Nevertheless, we had an excellent three-hour dining experience with excellent service. We had chosen the tasting menu to avoid too many blank looks as we perused the menu and that turned out to be a good choice. The details were printed on a card at the table, but for the most part we simply sat back, nodded or smiled as each course was explained – and thoroughly enjoyed everything. Abalone (which we had never tried previously) was featured on three of the courses and (we were told) got more delicious as we progressed from the Chinese to the Australian to the New Zealand form of the shellfish. Other courses featured pork, several kinds of fish, and “dozens” of vegetables – some familiar, most not! The waiter was very obliging, and we spent quite a few minutes at the end of the evening discussing Chinese restaurant food here and at home. Many similarities – and at least tonight – many wonderful differences. It was a great way to experience a variety of dishes in beautiful surroundings.

### ***Tuesday November 12***

We were awake a little earlier today and had breakfast in the lounge around 8:45. After that we went for our day (or part of a day) on Victoria Peak, the highest point (1800 feet) overlooking Hong Kong city and the rest of the island. Rather than take the traditional route up via the funicular rail-



way, we chose to take a double-decker bus from the central bus station. We took the Underground from the hotel to the bus station which required quite a lot of walking. However, the 40-minute bus ride was both exciting and amazing, with spectacular views of the city as we climbed to the Peak.





Once there, we found that the experience had changed significantly since our last visit six years ago and quite dramatically since our first visit almost 25 years ago. Two several storey buildings packed with souvenir shops, packed cafes and even a Madam Tussauds (!) had replaced the more open overlook that – for our money – had been far more attractive. I suppose the entrepreneurs know what they are doing and know what brings visitors (and makes them spend) but we were happy to take in the views (somewhat hazy on an otherwise sunny day) and then head back to town on the bus.

We got off before the central bus station and were able to find our way via the subterranean walkways and the mall back to our hotel – by way of a bar where we each enjoyed a cool drink. Later, we had afternoon tea in the Club Lounge and then relaxed until dinner time.

After several failed attempts to get reservations at local restaurants, we decided to eat in the hotel once again, this time at Flint – which is basically part of the Club Lounge. I wondered about the ambiance and just how “hotel-ish” it might be – but we were very pleasantly surprised. The salads were fresh and modestly sized and the lobster that I had, and the duck preferred by Molly were very good – and we even had room for dessert and after dinner drinks. Altogether, we had a very pleasant evening and excellent service from the staff.

### ***Wednesday November 13***

It was raining as we had breakfast, so we lingered in the lounge for a while – and chatted with another American couple who were taking the same cruise as us later in the week.

About 11am, we decided to take our trip to Stanley Market – a “traditional” event on all trips to Hong Kong. We walked through the mall to the bus stop near Admiralty and took another double-decker to the southern end of Hong Kong island. It’s a ride much like the one we took yesterday to the Peak, with steep, winding climbs and sweeping vistas of the resorts and small dormitory villages that dot the coastline. We had our usual “hiccup” on arrival at Stanley and had to re-board the bus for one stop to reach the short road down to the market.



Stanley Market is a series of relatively small shops along a narrow, covered street and one could imagine that it was once the local shopping center for Stanley residents. Nowadays, it caters predominantly to the tourists who little they need flock here to find – but many things they want. We have used it in the past as a source of stocking stuffers for Christmas gifts and today was no exception. I felt that the market had shrunk since our last visit – and indeed there were a few empty shops – and it did seem far less busy than we had remembered. Perhaps its appeal is waning, or we just went on a bad day. As I said, it had rained earlier and, although we were able to walk around under cloudy skies but with no further showers, the forecast may have deterred some.

We had a very nice light lunch (in air-conditioned comfort) and then walked back to the

bus terminus. On the way back to town it started to rain and there was a torrential downpour for almost all of the 40-minute journey. Fortunately, it had almost stopped by the time we reached our stop, and we were quickly able to get into the covered area that took us back to the hotel.

We had afternoon tea in the lounge again and then relaxed until dinner time. Tonight, we used Uber to take us to the Mandarin Oriental Hotel where we dined in the Michelin Star Mandarin Bar and Grill. We had an excellent meal (steak for me and Molly had pigeon), followed by a souffle dessert and after-dinner drinks. All of this was accompanied by the excellent service that one might expect in a restaurant of this stature. Once again, the efficient but “not rushed” two- hour meal reflected the cultural differences between here and home. We returned to the hotel via Uber on a still-warm and windy evening – but no rain.

#### **Thursday November 14**

Molly had stomachache during the night but seemed to be essentially recovered by the time we got up at 8:30. Clouds covered the hilltops and there were on-and-off showers. Hong Kong is currently under a level T8 typhoon warning as a tropical typhoon approaches the Pearl River estuary just to the west of the island. It’s not clear exactly what this means but at 8:30 there was essentially no traffic on the roads we could see from the hotel and – we have read – some of the bus and train services are curtailed at this warning level. If it should get to a level 9 (not expected today) most of the public transport system shuts down. Hopefully, all will be back to normal tomorrow as we start our cruise!!



Although the typhoon had passed Hong Kong, the rain, wind and mist hung around all day. Molly felt more like staying around the hotel rather than taking the train and ferry to Kowloon, which had been our plan. So, we had a leisurely breakfast and went to the mall under the hotel for a walk and a light lunch.

For dinner tonight, we went to the Chinese restaurant in the mall. Once we figured out how best to communicate with the waiter, we both had very good meals -lobster for me and a typical Chinese chicken dinner for Molly. We also had dessert before retiring.

#### **Friday November 15**

We had breakfast in the lounge and then spent the morning in our room, slowly packing for our drive to the cruise terminal. Our Uber drive arrived just before 1pm and it was about 20 minutes to the Celebrity Solstice. Check-in was the “old fashioned” way in that we snaked along long queues, stopping at various desks for document control and baggage check. Nevertheless, we were in our cabin before 2:30, having completed our lifeboat drill (much less involved these days).



We had a light lunch, and I went for a walk around the jogging track on Deck 14. That deck is one above our room, which is aligned along the stern of the ship, such that our views are great as the ship sails. I was particularly looking forward to the views of Hong Kong and Kowloon as we sailed at 5:30. Shortly thereafter, it was dark, and the lights of the city made for some great scenes.

After only 30 minutes of sailing, the ship turned around and docked again at the terminal. We were told that something had malfunctioned, and that diagnostic testing must be performed. This would take about 2 hours but would not impact our arrival time in Hanoi. So, we had our pre-dinner drink in the lounge and then dined in the main restaurant in a non-crowded environment. When we returned to our room about 10pm, we were still docked so we were going to miss the views of the cities.



We went to bed, slept quite well – and at some point, we sailed.

### ***Saturday November 16***

We were up before eight and had breakfast on Deck 14. The weather was far better than forecast – mostly sunny and warm – so I was able to do some walking before lunch. We were sailing the South China Sea and, by lunchtime, we were about half-way to Hanoi on the first of our “At Sea” days. The seas had calmed considerably also, so spending time on board was pleasant.

Tonight, we went for the first of our Specialty Dining meals at the Tuscan Grill. As expected, it was a very good meal (salmon and lasagna) and the service and ambiance made it so much more special.

### ***Sunday November 17***

We were up at 6:30 in order to get breakfast on board before our shore excursion to Hanoi. We left the ship soon after 8am and drove along the expressway most of the way to Hanoi, a journey of about 3 hours. The area through which we drove, after leaving the city of Ha Lan (much bigger than we expected, with some high-rise apartments and many hotels), was mostly farmland, with every kind of crop imaginable – including grapes! We skirted the city of Haiphong (also large and the leading seaport of North Vietnam) and later entered the vast conurbation that is Hanoi.

Our first stop was at the “Hanoi Hilton”, a large and somber prison where American pilots shot down in the Vietnam War were housed – some for as much as 8 years. As we had observed on our last visit where (and as our guide pointed out), the pictures and captions in what is now a museum were written by the victors and reflected poorly on the American forces and their impact on the war.



### ***Bustling Hanoi and one of its nice French Colonial buildings***

Our next stop was a Novotel Hotel where we had a very good buffet lunch before driving to the Ho Chi Minh Mausoleum. This – like the Mao Tomb in Beijing – is a huge, square building that sits on one side of a large plaza, opposite government buildings and the military headquarters. Ho Chi Minh (Uncle Ho) is still revered in Vietnam as the liberator of the country following the French colonial era and the father (or uncle – since he had no children) of the Republic.

Ho was a communist, as was much of Northern Vietnam, whereas the South was primarily Catholic, and tensions between the two were high right from the start. The separation of ideologies was further exacerbated



in 1954 by the Geneva Accords, which split the country at the 17<sup>th</sup> parallel – another fine example of the winners splitting the spoils of war! This split, of course, became a proxy for the Cold War with Russia and China supporting the North and the USA entering on behalf of the South. We all know how that turned out.....



*The huge  
Ho Chi  
Minh plaza  
with the  
mausoleum  
and gov-  
ernment  
buildings*

Ho lived in Hanoi and our next stop (after quite a walk) was at his simple but very attractive home overlooking a lovely small lake. We then walked around the lake to Ho's final home where he lived out his remaining years, and where he died in 1969, ending his 24 years as president of what was now a united country – one of five Communist countries that now exist in the world.



*An unusual  
pagoda and a  
long shot of  
Ho Chi Minh  
plaza*



From the Ho Chi Minh complex, we were driven to the Old Town of Hanoi, which we remembered vividly and fondly from our first visit. We used small (six-seater) electric vehicles to follow the crowded and narrow streets of the Old Town and got an up-close glimpse of the daily life of this bustling neighborhood. We were then left to our own devices for about 45 minutes before the bus ride back to Ho Lang. Molly and I walked to the lake and people-watched, many of whom were dressed in strange costumes and attending a festival nearby. We were also approached by several schoolchildren who asked very politely if they could talk with us for a while as a means to improving their English. The 8- to 10-year-olds asked the same questions of each



of us (“what is your name?”, “where are you from?”, “what color do you like?”, etc) and, in the case of the small boy who talked to me, it was obvious that he was mentally reviewing his classroom notes as he thought of each question. It was a fascinating and humbling experience and one that we have seen repeated in many countries around the world.

We arrived back at the ship at 7pm after a tiring but interesting day and immediately got ready for dinner in the main dining room.

**Monday November 18**

Our shore excursion today had another 8am start as we left to explore Ha Long city and get some views of the unique limestone “mountains” dotted in the bay. We had a brief stop at a point on the bay where we could see several such hills, and then we went to a museum for an hour.



*Our first views of the remarkable islands in Ha Long Bay and some of the city’s colonial*

It was a modern three-storey building with a series of exhibits covering the natural history of the area. One area was dedicated to the coal mining which is a huge part of the economy here and one that produces a large part of the nation’s coal, especially that of superior quality. Another area showed various aspects of local life, another dealt with past artwork, and so on. It was quite interesting (perhaps didn’t need an hour in my opinion) but seemed to lack real focus and was a little bit haphazard.

From the museum we went via the local street market to a Buddhist temple





which was very ornately decorated with Buddhas and other statuary, much of which was covered in gold. Our ten-minute stay was extended a little due to a very heavy downpour. The timing couldn't have been better as we sheltered in the temple and the rain had let up by the time we walked to the large indoor market. This was basically a souvenir shop-

ping area, so Molly and I walked back to the street and found a local coffee shop where we both enjoyed our drinks (cold, milky for Molly – black and very strong for me) and a pleasant conversation with a local young man.

We returned to the ship around noon, and we set sail for Da Nang at 2pm. The weather now was sunny and warm, and we had some tremendous views of the bay and the hundreds of limestone hills as we left the city. It was a wonderful way to leave what had been a new city for us and a very pleasant two-day stay.





## ***Beautiful Ha Long Bay***

***We were certainly glad that we made it  
on this visit.***

This evening, we experienced a problem at dinner as someone else was seated at our table when we arrived. The confusion was eventually cleared up by giving us another table where we were able to enjoy another good meal.

### ***Tuesday November 19***

We had experienced some heavy swells overnight and the morning was overcast and rainy as we docked in Hue, about 20 miles north of Da Nang which was the destination for our shore excursion today. We left soon after 9am and drove into the city of Da Nang, primarily along the coast. It was quite misty, but it appeared that the area is surrounded by mountains which seem to reach almost to the shoreline. Much of the latter is a long, sandy beach (although huge waves were predominant today) and as we got closer to the city this was lined with huge resort hotels with all the well-known names and many others. Apparently, Da Nang has become a favorite vacation spot for Japanese, Koreans and Indians – and they must like to spend!

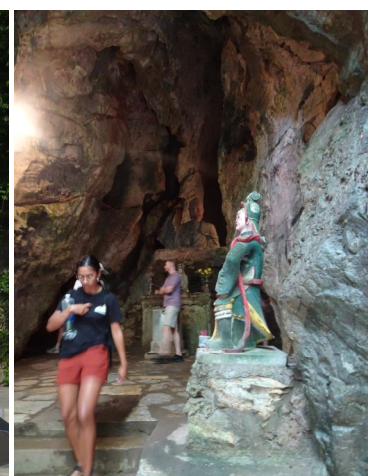


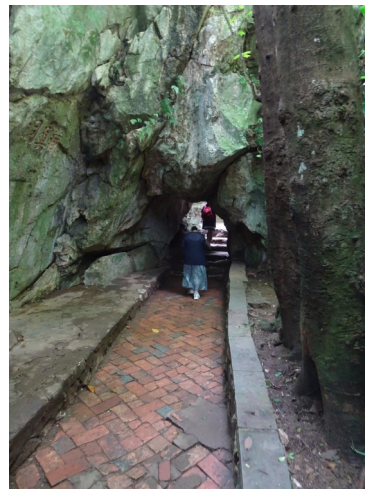
***Da Nang beach and resorts***

Our first stop was at a site on one of the hillsides that featured a pagoda and a huge Buddha statue. Unfortunately, our guide was essentially useless as he didn't give any details of why they were there, and how old they were, nor any statistics on the size. Nevertheless, it was a beautiful location and allowed for some great views over the water and the city.



Next was a marble shop, where local artisans had sculpted many figures of every shape, size and color and, of course, had also fabricated a wide variety of jewelry for sale! From there, we went to Marble Mountain (I assume the original source of that used by the craftsmen but, again, no comment from the guide). Here there was a modern glass elevator that took us about 200 feet up to another small pagoda in a cave on the hillside. Once again, information was almost non-existent, but the area was attractive – and the walk back down some rough-hewn steps was quite exciting.





We had a very pleasant sit-down lunch in a nice hotel before visiting – in quick succession – a Catholic church (the guide said that 30% of the population is Catholic, which I find difficult to believe despite years as a French colony) which was a pretty pink on the outside, a very crowded market which we forced our way through, and a museum. Here we spent about 25 minutes with, again, no help from the guide as to what we were looking at.



These last three stops were close to each other, so we walked – just as another of the late afternoon downpours was in full swing. With drenched clothes and little information from the guide, we concluded the tour and returned to the ship. What could have been an educational experience in a new city was a tour that allowed us to see the city (quite prosperous it seems) but not to learn much about it.

Tonight, we dined in Murano for the first time on this cruise. Murano is the most expensive of the specialty dining restaurants onboard and we have enjoyed meals there in the past. Molly had the venison, which she thought was

excellent, and I had the Dover sole. I thought my fish was a little dry but still very tasty but we both felt that the portions were too large – unusual in general outside the US and particularly surprising here. The soufflé dessert was excellent.

We had set sail just before dinner and immediately ran into rough seas. When we returned to our rooms, the wardrobe doors were sliding in their runners and making loud crashing noises as the ship rolled. This had happened on two prior evenings, but we had been able to stop it by stuffing towels between the doors. That didn't work tonight so we had Maintenance come. They couldn't fix it so they removed the doors so we could sleep.

### ***Wednesday November 20.***

Today was another "At Sea". We slept late, had breakfast and then relaxed on board. I did some walking, we had lunch, I did a little more walking, and we napped. And the doors got fixed! That was our day until dinner time when we went to another Specialty dinner – this time an Indian meal that took place in what is usually Le Petit Chef.

Neither of us felt that the meal was as good as it should have been and, again, there was far too much food.

### ***Thursday November 21***

We were up at 6am to have breakfast and leave (at 7:30) for the city of Saigon. We were docked about 50 miles from the city center, so we had over an hour of driving before we got into the snarl of traffic that a city of 9 million brings.

Our first stop was at a Tao Buddhist temple which was quite small but had some interesting figures representing the various gods. Many of the statues were made of papier mâché we were told.



Next, was the Reunification Building which has had several names and functions over the years as the regimes changed from French colonial to the newly formed independent country after 1945, and finally to the present name since the fall of Saigon as the Communist north won the war. It is an impressive three or four storey almost square building with many reception rooms and others used for official functions by the presiding government. It is now a tourist destination with no official use, and we remembered it as the first building we visited on our first visit to Saigon and Vietnam.

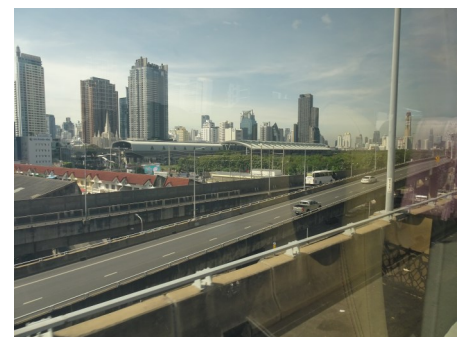


Next, was the Ho Chi Minh city museum, which had several interesting exhibits on Vietnamese life over the years. I was particularly interested in the description of the massive tunnel complex that the Viet Cong had built (under the French occupation) which were widely used in the latter days of the war and which the Americans tried unsuccessfully to eradicate. The complex reminded me of what I suppose is modern-day Gaza and built in the same manner (with houses or schools as entry points). For reasons that weren't clear, the complex was built in one of the outer suburbs of the city and attracted most of the offensive with the result that Saigon suffered relatively minor damage was taken up with the almost inevitable visit to a lacquer facility (with huge shop!)

We had lunch at a nice hotel, drove by the cathedral (unfortunately under renovation), stopped in the railway station and then had free time – which Molly and I used to get a cold drink.



*Saigon  
railway  
station  
(above)  
and  
Opera  
House*



We then started the drive back to the ship at the end of an interesting day in Saigon, officially now Ho Ch Minh City but the locals prefer Saigon. It had been sunny all day, which made for perhaps the hottest day we have seen so far, so reaching the air-conditioned ship around 5:30 was something of a relief.

Tonight, we ate in the main dining room at our new table and had a lovely conversation with our waiter from India.

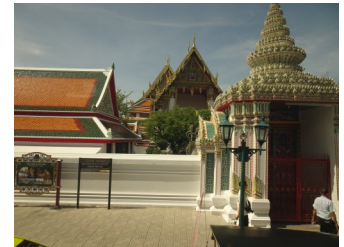
### ***Friday November 22***

Today was another "At Sea" day so we had a leisurely breakfast, a leisurely lunch, a few stints of walking or reading and then got ready for dinner in the Tuscan Grill! What a hectic day!

**Saturday November 23**

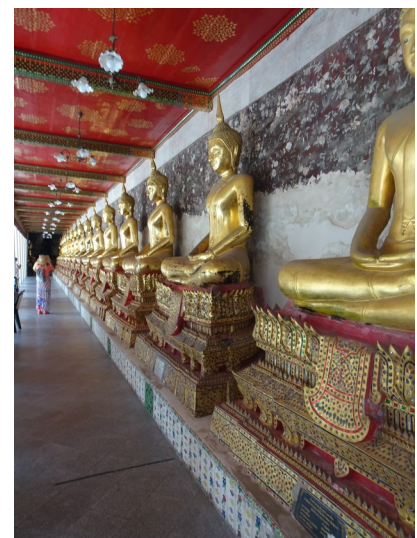
We were up early again (7am) to have breakfast before our shore excursion “Panoramic Bangkok and Free Time”. We knew that it was about a 2-hour journey into the city from the terminal but late yesterday we learned that there would be about 4 hours of “free time” in a shopping mall (“Biggest in Southeast Asia!”) which seemed excessive, and we debated canceling. Of course, the deadline for a refund had passed (!) so, after much deliberation, we decided to take the trip.

The first hour or more of the drive was through flat land (although there were some significant hills further inland) that was primarily farming and fishing, together with a smattering of industrial sites. As we reached the sprawl that is Bangkok (10-12 million population) the traffic got heavier although it generally kept moving until we were approaching the center.

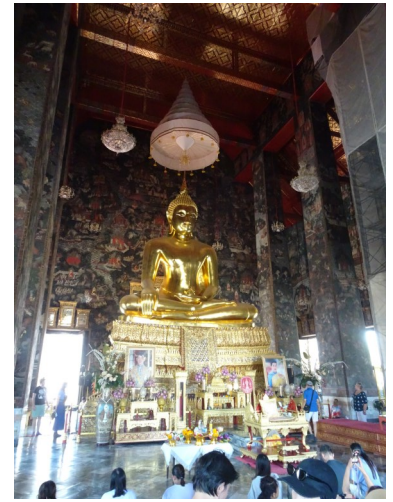


***Driving in Bangkok with views of the Royal Palace***

We drove through a large Chinatown (10% of the population are Chinese), past a flower market (although there was not much evidence from our viewpoint on the bus) and stopped at Wat Suthat, a Buddhist temple famous for its bronze seated Buddha. We had about 30 minutes here to admire the temple and the many colorful statues and other features of a temple. It was a very pleasant stop as the weather, although quite hot, seemed a lot less humid than the days in Vietnam and a cooling breeze helped even more.



***Wat Suthat***



On the way to the temple, we had driven past the vast complex that is the

Royal Palace and many other civic buildings that are the highlight of any visit to Bangkok – indeed, to Thailand. Fortunately, this was not our first visit so the cursory glimpse didn't bother us much – but it must have been disappointing for first-time visitors. For us, the amazing Thai-style architecture and the green, red and orange (predominantly) colors, as well as the beautifully manicured gardens, simply reminded us of the many hours we have spent here in the past.

Then, it was the four-hour stop at the mall! We were surprised (not to say disappointed) that this was an ultra-modern, seven-storey complex that had all the shops one might recognize anywhere in the world. We could have been in any large city almost anywhere. To make the best of it, we spent almost an hour seeking out a restaurant for lunch and most of the next hour enjoying a good Thai meal. We then wandered around several floors, had a coffee (Starbucks!), and made our way back to the bus. It hadn't proved as daunting as we had expected and simply seeing the variety of people in the mall made for an interesting visit.

The drive back to the ship (another 2 hours) seemed to go rather quickly and we arrived back "home" in time to shower and change for dinner, which tonight is in the main dining room.

**Sunday November 24**

It was another early morning to have breakfast before our 8:15 shore excursion. Today, we went to "Old Siam", a huge facility about 90 minutes from the cruise terminal. The concept was originated about 60 years ago by a wealthy person (actually Chinese) who wanted to leave something to recognize Thailand's history, culture and – especially – its architecture. To do this he has built (rather, is still building") temples, homes and other buildings that reflect the Thai landscape from north to south.

Most of the buildings are half-scale or less but a few are full size. All are replicas (in some cases, the actual building re-assembled here) of either famous sites or copies of traditional homes, stupas, etc. We moved around most of the facility



by tram but were able to get off to visit temples and look a little more closely at a building. It is an amazing (and ongoing) “copy” of Old Siam and is beautifully laid out and maintained.





*Old Siam — a wonderful overview of an amazing country*

We spent about two hours taking in as much as we could of the colorful architecture (one tends to overload even in such a beautiful setting) before being driven back to the ship, where we arrived around 3:30 – in time for afternoon tea! Tonight, we had an excellent evening dining in Murano.

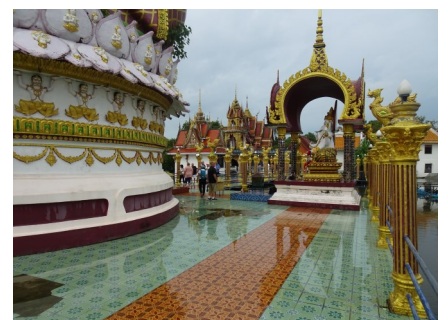
**Monday November 25**

A lightning storm had followed us for several hours during the night and a tremendous downpour occurred as we arrived at Ko Samui. Our day there looked in jeopardy, but it dried up as we ate breakfast, so we decided to go ashore. The ship was anchored so we took tenders to the island. It was a very hot and humid ride but took only fifteen minutes.



## **Welcome to Ko Samui! Sand, Sea and (?) Sun**

On shore, we got on our bus for a sightseeing trip around the island which is basically a large hill with all the hotels, shops and homes at sea level all around the coast. We stopped to see two magnificent temple complexes – and experience two more heavy showers – before stopping at a very nice resort for a buffet lunch “on the beach”.





We continued our drive, stopped once more to visit a coconut plantation, and then were driven back to the pier. The line for the tenders was very long but Molly's cane got us to the front of the queue, and we were first on the tender. Actually, for this return trip, a local sightseeing boat was used (rather than a ship lifeboat) which held a lot more people. This made the whole process seem much more efficient and we were soon back in our stateroom, in plenty of time for a walk and clean up before our final "chic" evening – posh frock and suit for us!

As we sailed from Ko Samui, we passed dozens of islands, many of which were covered in lush green flora that reached right to the ocean. It was a very pretty sail for about an hour. The wind was now strong, and we had some more rain, but we were told that the waves overnight would be quite moderate.



Our dinner in the main dining room was very pleasant and we said “good-bye” to our waiters and watched an elaborate walk-through of all the hotel staff.

### ***Tuesday November 26***

This was our last day on board, and it was another “At Sea” day. The seas had been a little rough overnight but were to be a little higher during the day – and we were to experience strong winds and occasional showers. I managed to get in two walks, we had a leisurely lunch and began the packing process.

Tonight, we had our last dinner on board for this trip and enjoyed another good meal in the Tuscan Grill.

### ***Wednesday November 27***

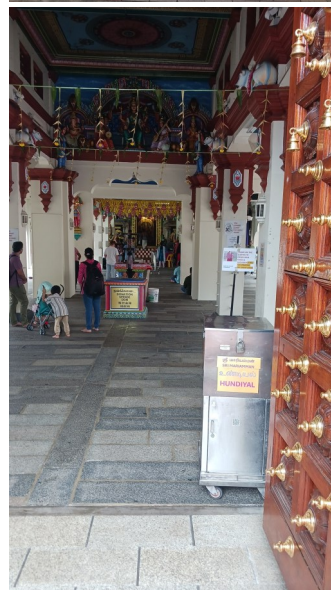
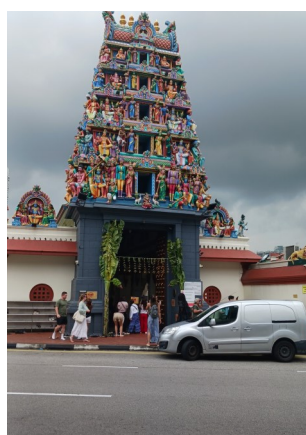
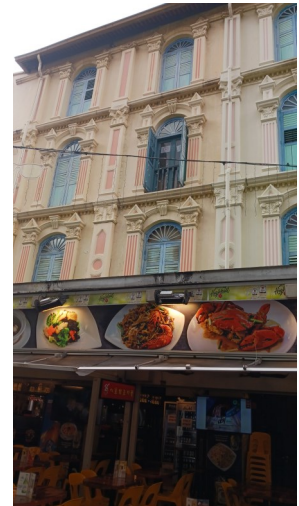
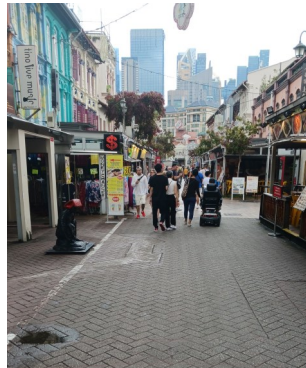
We vacated our cabin at 7:30 and had breakfast on the ship before disembarkation at 9:30. The process went smoothly and we soon had a taxi to the Marriott Hotel, on Orchard Rd where we have stayed several times in the past.

Our room wasn't ready (it was 10:30 am!) so we went to the subway station beneath the hotel and purchased our pass for the five-day stay in Singapore. We had coffee in the lounge and soon were told that our room was ready, so we checked into our 20<sup>th</sup> floor suite. We then took the subway to Clarke Quay where we had a pizza lunch before relaxing in our room for the afternoon.

Tonight, we walked a couple of blocks to the Grand Hyatt for an Italian meal at Pete's Place in the hotel. The ambience was a little dark and the basement restaurant was quite crowded, but we enjoyed our almost 2-hour dinner.

### ***Thursday November 28 (Thanksgiving Day Asia Time)***

We went to breakfast in the Club Lounge and then started our day out in Chinatown. We walked the length of the main outdoor shopping area (helping the local economy as we went), stopped to see the Hindu Temple just as a very noisy “service” was taking place, and had a very refreshing cool drink.



***Chinatown  
and Hindu  
Temple***



***And my new hat!***

We then took the SMRT back to the hotel just as it started to rain. We snacked in the room, I visited the lounge for a cocktail and then we got ready for dinner in the Hilton Hotel, not too far from the Marriott.



We walked past lots of Christmas decorations along Orchard Road and dodged a few showers before reaching the restaurant where we had a very good meal with impeccable service. We walked back under a dry and pleasantly cool sky.

**Friday November 29**

We had breakfast in the club lounge and then stayed in our room for most of the morning waiting for the rain to stop, or at least let up a little. Just before noon, it seemed worth a try, so we took the SMRT to Bugis, from where it was a ten-minute walk to the Arab area of Singapore. This being Friday, the Sultan Mosque area was crowded with worshippers (as well as tourists) as we approached to the sound of the muezzin calling everyone to prayer. This continued (with occasional longer breaks for what we assumed was the “sermon”) while we walked through the very colorful area and stopped for a snack at a Turkish restaurant.

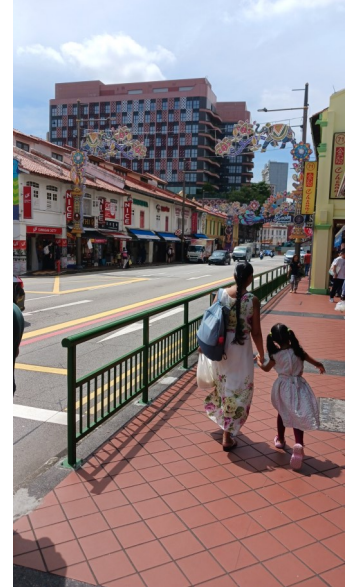


We then walked through the souvenir area (mostly silks and dresses) back to the SMRT station and back to the hotel – where we stopped for another drink and snack at the café right outside the Marriott. It was fun to sit for an hour and watch the world go by.

Tonight, we ate at 27 Degrees West, an Indian restaurant a couple of blocks from the hotel on Orchard Road. It was an excellent meal with great service, and we followed it up with a nightcap in the hotel lobby.

**Saturday November 30**

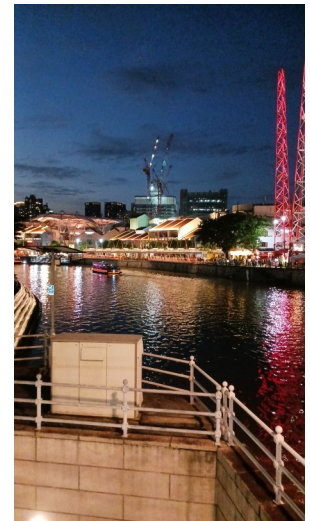
It was much brighter this morning and, as we left for our visit to Little India, the sun came out and it became very hot. We strolled along Serangoon Road to see a couple of temples and an old Chinese villa (1900) and, of course, we did a little more souvenir shopping. We had a cool drink in a lovely Indian bar and had a light lunch sitting outside the hotel when we returned.



Tonight, we took the subway to Clarke Quay, found an Indian restaurant on the riverside, and had a great meal. It was still warm and humid, but the overhead fans made it tolerable.

**Sunday December 1**

After breakfast we went to the riverfront and spent about two



hours walking on Clarke and Boat Quays. We finally realized (on our third visit here this trip) that we had been confusing the two Quays and now know the easiest way to get to all the restaurants on the water's edge. We saw the Raffle's statue, commemorating



his landing here and beginning the transformation of Singapore from a small village to the world center it is today. We walked to see city hall, the parliament buildings and the cathedral and also saw the finish line

for the Singapore marathon. How anyone can run in this heat and humidity is beyond me. We spent over an hour sitting in a riverfront restaurant (Indian again) and enjoyed a light lunch and some cool drinks. We then returned to the hotel for the afternoon.



Tonight, we ate in Wan Hao, the highly recommended Chinese restaurant in the hotel. We had eaten here before and remembered it as very good. We enjoyed the food and the service here this evening and were especially touched when two members of a family celebrating their father's ninetieth birthday brought both of us a piece of his birthday cake.

### ***Monday December 2/Tuesday December 3***

We had breakfast in the hotel and chatted about what we might do with our last day in Singapore for this trip. Molly didn't feel like spending time outdoors, so I took the SMRT to Chinatown and, after coming out of the wrong exit, wandered around until I found the shopping street. I couldn't find anything more that I "needed" so I went back to the hotel in time for a very light lunch with Molly.

We spent the afternoon relaxing and packing before checking out a little before 5pm. We had an early dinner at the Crossroads Restaurant in the lobby and then took a taxi to Changi airport. We arrived about 30 minutes before check-in opened but soon afterwards we were through Security and in the lounge. We boarded our Korean Air flight at 9:45 and left for Seoul at 10:30pm.

I had a portion of the meal, but Molly went straight to sleep. I followed shortly afterwards, and we both slept much of the 6-hour flight. We arrived in Seoul at 5:30am (Tuesday) – 1 hour ahead of Singapore – and moved easily through Security and to the KAL lounge. The staff were adamant that Molly use a wheelchair – which has the side benefit of moving ahead of the lines.

We spent about 2 hours in the lounge and then walked to the gate for our onward flight to Detroit, which left at 9:35am. It was 33F in Seoul, about 50 degrees cooler than anything we have seen for three weeks.

The 13-hour flight from Seoul to Detroit was smooth most of the way and we enjoyed two good meals onboard. I slept well after dinner until about halfway through the flight, but then it was fitful for the remaining six hours. Molly did somewhat better.

We arrived in Detroit on time to a temperature around freezing – much like what we left in Korea. Immigration and baggage pickup went smoothly but there were long lines to get through Security before the final flight. We still had a couple of hours in the SkyClub before our 12:15 flight to Cincinnati. On arrival at CVG, we picked up our bags, called an Uber and relaxed on the final leg to home. We arrived in Mason about 2:30 – about 34 hours after leaving the hotel in Singapore – after a fabulous trip to Southeast Asia. We hope to do something similar again soon!

