

## ***Noodles, Noodles Everywhere...***

***Eight countries, twenty-eight modes of transport, eighteen categories of food: Bethany Bristow tours Asia.***

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This year I was fortunate enough to have the opportunity to follow through with one of my long term goals of traveling to Asia. I somehow managed to visit eight countries in two months: Japan, China, Hong Kong, Vietnam, Cambodia, Thailand, Malaysia and Singapore. I moved very quickly, only spending an average of 4 days in each city. Some people thought it was unrealistic to plan an itinerary like this. To me the whole idea of taking this trip was beyond my reality, so time seemed like a minor detail in the larger scheme. As I traveled I found that what I was doing was entirely possible and it was incredibly empowering.

I made work (installations) along the way in some really interesting cities. The most intense, harsh and crazy place I visited was Shanghai. The most harmonious was Bangkok, with the way the aesthetic, spiritual and ephemeral are integrated into everyday life. The people in Thailand are remarkably welcoming, open and creative too. Hong Kong was also a favorite city of mine, with the way the built environment meshes with the topography, and the perfect mix of East and West, new and old.

I met some wonderful people along the way, but also experienced intense loneliness. There were highs and lows in possibly equal quantities. I pushed myself to my physical, emotional and intellectual limits. I schlepped around vast quantities of equipment and supplies, replaced my suitcase twice, took shipment of supplies from home twice and used every scrap of glass and physical and emotional energy I had. All this without knowing if the results would be satisfactory and feeling like I had everything to gain or lose. I spent days wandering around lost (often in the rain) - happy as can be - traipsing through thirteen airports and six train stations.

I stayed everywhere from a \$10 a night hostel lacking hot water or blankets to a suite at the Ritz Carlton. I also slept in two grass huts, three different sleeping berths on trains and one cabin on a boat, as well as a couple of really lovely homes as a house guest. I took every mode of transportation available: xe oms, moto, cyclos, rickshaws, moto-rickshaws, tuk tuks, taxis with white lace seat covers, gypsy cabs, pick-up trucks, vans, cars, the bts, the mtr, the mrt, the sky train, subways, monorails, funiculars, maglevs, double decker trams and busses, row boats, water taxis, commuter ferries, long boats, junks, bamboo rafts, bicycles and elephants. I saw countless temples, shrines, pagodas, mosques and churches as well as markets, shopping malls, and every kind of food concession imaginable. I experienced the high and low in dining atmospheres; drinks by the pool at the Oriental Hotel in Bangkok, meals taken on little plastic stools on various street corners across South East Asia.

I ate wide varieties of foods: raw (sushi at Tsukiji tuna market and at a stand-up sushi counter in Tokyo), cooked (Mongolian hotpot with hot coals to keep the broth boiling), slimy and chewy (a very strange snail in Tokyo and chicken feet in Hong Kong), smelly ("stinky" tofu in Beijing), crunchy (deep fried crickets in Thailand), aromatic (peanuts roasted with lime leaves and chilies in Bangkok) succulent (Beijing duck in Beijing), cruel (bacon at breakfast after being woken at 4 AM by the sound of pigs being slaughtered in Hoi An), dreamy (Franco-Vietnamese ice cream at Fanny's in Hanoi and Saigon), salty (pommelos dipped in red salt in Vietnam), sweet (tropical fruit all across South East Asia), sweet and sour (candied crab apples on a stick in Beijing), fast and cheap (ramen, soba, pho, bun cha goi, pad thai, curry noodles, noodles, noodles everywhere), slow and expensive (Kyoto cuisine in a traditional Ryokan), exquisite (a small ornately decorated cake packed in a box with dry ice from a department store in Tokyo), high-tech (sushi on a conveyor belt in Tokyo), low-tech (meals cooked over a fire with the hill tribes of Northern Thailand and numerous street meals all over South East Asia) and cross-cultural (A Deepavali/Thanksgiving dinner party in Singapore, Indian food in Singapore and Kuala Lumpur, French food in Saigon and croissants in Hanoi).

Meals were shared with strangers, travelers, expats, locals, new friends, a "grandma" in Hoi An (who hand-fed me banh xeo), and even a very friendly cat in Bangkok who sat on my lap and ate the leftover heads and tails of shrimp. I frequently ate alone writing in my journal because that was the only time I had to write. I managed to avoid eating at McDonalds and the bizarrely popular KFCs that seem to be the ultimate sign of American influence and affluence for the populace of the developing economies of Asia. I did not manage to avoid finding rubber bands in three meals, all in Vietnam for some reason. I also got sick a few times and was glad I had Clif bars and oatmeal to tide me over when I was hungry and too tired to go out and forage.

I lost my proficiency in American English, but gained a whole new lexicon of Asian English. I tried to pick up as many basic words as I could in each country - without mixing them all up. The best experience was being able to communicate without words, especially while I was working. In fact, my experience interacting with people was completely different while I was working. People were curious but very respectful. No one hassled me, not even the police (although Saigon was a little dicey with the notoriety that place has for thieves). Bangkok was a particularly amazing place to work in. Ephemeral expressions are everywhere, with flower garlands and offerings, markets that spring up and then disappear hours later, daily rain storms, and festivals.

Conversely when I was just a tourist in some places, I was confronted by non-stop touts and sales pitches, exhausting and mind numbing after a while. There are so many people in Asia and everyone is hungry for economic growth and security, as there is no social safety net and plenty of disparity between rich and poor. There is exploitation and manipulation of everyone and everything, coupled with hyper-materiality and sometimes it felt like there was no social conscience,

aside from ritualized charity as a means to ensure "luck". And then there is the very Asian notion of "saving face" - something we don't have in the US. However, its social importance seems to be equivalent to the notion of trustworthiness or integrity here.

Along the lines of "saving face" I also had the experience of appearing different, in a physical sense than the locals. In Beijing I was on the receiving end of quite a few stares. These were not discrete looks, but rather flat out stares as though I had two heads - and one of them was on fire. In Vietnam, my pallor was the subject of much admiration. By comparison here in the US, I am ridiculed for looking like a ghost. Of course, those Vietnamese ladies cover themselves head to toe with hats, face masks, and long gloves before getting on their motorbikes (plus every cosmetic and personal care item in Asia seems to have the word "whitening" on their labels).

On the subject of motorbikes, a family of four can actually fit comfortably on one motorbike - although I heard someone say they once saw six monks on one. Cars have replaced bicycles in China. Traffic is stultifying. The pollution is grave. And the stereotype of the Chinese spitting all the time is true. You hear the sound of someone spitting every few minutes. The air was so bad that after a few days I started feeling like I wanted to spit too.

Pollution has pushed its way into Hong Kong too. The first day that I went to Victoria's Peak, I could not see the buildings and harbor below. I could only see faint outlines of what might be there. The air was much cleaner when I arrived in Vietnam. However, the noise pollution was unlike anything I've ever experienced - even as a New Yorker. One hears the constant whine of motorbikes and beeping horns. Horns are used as safety and navigation devices. In Hanoi every vehicle passed receives a toot - whether it's on the highway or city street. Then there was also the matter of the loudspeakers in the morning. In Hoi An, I woke to some kind of proclamations beginning at 6 A.M. everyday. That was quite a bit different from Japan, where even the cities are very quiet. I only heard sirens once in Japan, and the loudest thing in the morning are the cries of ravens roosting on the overhead power lines.

I've been back in New York for just over a month now. I dealt with culture shock and climate shock the moment I landed. I moved back into my studio, unpacked, and ran all my film and contact sheets. There is plenty of post-production to do. I hope to have something to show in a month or so.

In the meantime I am doing a project for "Parts to the Whole" curated by Elizabeth Grady at Vox Populi in Philly. This exhibition explores the formal tension between the scale of small sculptures and the setting in which they are exhibited. Runs January 6 through January 29, Wednesday - Sunday 12-6 PM. Vox Populi, 1315 Cherry Street, 4th floor, Philadelphia. <http://www.voxpopuligallery.org/>. If you happen to be in Philly please check this out or tell your friends!