



Karin was washing dishes. When she reached for the tea towel, something moved! She peaked behind and looked into the eyes of this monster scorpion.

It is called the Lao Black Forest Scorpion and has the strange ability to glow blue under UV light. They are 12 cm long from the mouth to the end of their tail.

One of the ladies from the kitchen staff chased it back into the jungle.

We were certainly impressed with the size, but some of the West African scorpions get to be quite a bit larger (emperor scorpion = 23 cm.) They can be fatal because when you see one you have a heart attack.

## Welcome To Laos!

The place where we are staying is called “Jungle House”. It is carefully designed to look like a Jungle with attendant vines, ferns, palms, exotic flowers and a green pond with colourful fish. In short it is an idyllic oasis where you are captured by a desire to never want to leave.

On our arrival, our host, Mike, pointed out this happy little guy to the right. Actually it's a stink bug. They are apparently nutritious with lots of protein, fat, vitamins and minerals.

'I'm afraid, we've have a bit of drama,' Mike said. There was an English visitor who arrived from China and after a few days had to be hospitalized with three slipped discs in his spine. Ah, I see that that will need some explaining. Rob, the hospitalized, was travelling in China when he came upon a car accident. One person had been killed, but Rob (who is quite powerful) managed to extract an injured person from the wreck. The rescue was filmed and aired online. It went viral with millions of viewers. He was subsequently offered a job on Chinese television as the anchor for a program because of his newly acquired fame (and his command of the Chinese language). BUT. There was one condition. He had to lose some pounds.



Soooo. He came to Jungle House where in the most pleasant of circumstances he was to attempt to lose 20 kgs. In his exuberance in the gym he unfortunately squeezed out some of the padding between his vertebrae.

Mike took us to the Lao hospital to view the results.

The hospital was not up to standard and Rob had been left for several days lying flat on his back in great pain. He was miserable and wanted above all to get away. The upshot of all this was that Karin offered to accompany Rob to a hospital in Thailand (where most people go for their 'surgical tourism' (yes, you may grimace)). Karin slept for 4 days on a couch in the hospital while Rob was examined, poked, prodded, photographed (MRI), physiotherapied and carefully attended to by happy elves.

There was a gradual improvement. Karin spent much time keeping up Rob's spirits and planning his transportation to England.

In the meantime back at Jungle House.....

Bruce was painting and generally having a good time without a care in the world. This was aided to a large part by Mike who is an endless well of stories and history and Xoukiet's culinary masterpieces.

Finally after 4 days Mike and Bruce drove to the border between Thailand and Laos. Here there is a bridge which crosses the Mekong and serves as the conduit between the two countries. This is where we were to fetch Karin. She was dropped off on the Thai side and Bruce was on the Lao side. They raced toward one another reaching out, their white robes flying behind and their hearts thrilled with passion. Then just as they reached the centre of the bridge, it collapsed, their bodies falling hopelessly toward the river below, their hands reaching out, their fingers a hair's breadth away, but not quite touching. The tension was infinite. Not withstanding the pressure, the universe collapsed into a singularity. Nothingness. Curtain.

Well, point being... Bruce was happy to have Karin back.

The age difference between Mike and Xoukiet is 29 years. Thus we lost the distinction of having an impressively Big Age Gap. Ach. Such is scandal's capricious nature.

Xoukiet is Buddhist and lights candles and incense on the shrine just outside our cottage door. There is a bit of comfort to be gained knowing that there are forces, *which a lot of people believe in*, protecting you.

Mike takes part in the Buddhist ceremonies though his belief in the spirits is somewhat lacking. So Mike does the part of communing with Buddha and beating the gong but Xoukiet does the part contacting the spirits. Once when Xoukiet was too busy to do the spirits she asked Mike if he could step in. He thought that the spirits would be none too pleased considering the infirmity of his faith, but when in Rome....



It is quite easy to be enamoured with Buddhism as its customs are quite pleasant. I think Buddhism is why there are two very unremarkable dogs on the property: a deformed 3 legged one (looking a bit like Richard III) and another mutt of indistinct lineage who are treated with care. The second of these loyally guards the entrance by peeking under the gate and barking at passing beggar dogs.

“Hark, hark! The dogs do bark,  
The beggars are coming to town.  
Some in rags,  
And some in tags,  
And one in a golden gown.”

← Mike

Karin has now taken off once again to accompany Rob from Udon Thani to Bangkok. He cannot walk and will need to use a wheel chair to board the ‘plane. He has been given an epidural steroid injection to dampen the inflammation and seems in a positive mood. From Bangkok he will fly in a horizontal position to London. Karin will fly back to Vientiane and will just manage to be back in time to fly off on our holiday to the Maldives I have just received a last missive from Karin: “We’re off in 10 minutes or so, wish us luck!”



Although the world is becoming one great homogenous civilization, there are some distinct national characteristics around that are quite unique still. One example in Laos is the large number of huge mansions that line the biggest road in Vientiane. I asked Mike if the poor citizens of Laos don’t look askance at such an ostentatious display of wealth. He said, no, on the contrary, the mansion owners are thought to be lucky because they have now been paid for their goodness in a previous life. I somehow doubt their present day ‘goodness’ would survive close inspection.



## Overnight in Bangkok



They told us that our room was special.

And it was - very special! With flowers and towels folded like swans and bunnies.

## Hong Kong

Karin got us an upgrade in our hotel. "Upgrade" in Hong Kong emphasizes the 'up'.. The room is

the same size, but on the 26<sup>th</sup> floor. I look out the window and opposite us is a building that is just 8 by 6 meters. It is 22 stories high and has about 2 rooms on each floor. The guy in the reception explained that a room that is 30 m<sup>2</sup> would cost 3 million kroner in Hong Kong. So that skinny building is worth 66 million.

We went out to try and find an interesting place to eat. Karin stopped at a nondescript door. "This looks like a good place." (Why?). Inside there is a glassed-in counter with a few pastries. Karin asks, "Is the restaurant open?" (What restaurant?) The lady says, "Restaurant open. No dim sum. Take elevator. (Oh, the one behind some shelves.) We get in and Karin punches the "3" beside which is an explanation in Chinese characters. (How did she know??) When we reach our floor, we step out into a very large room with only



Chinese people. They all jumped up and shouted 'SUPPLIES!'

Not really, but given the prior events it wouldn't be at all unlikely.

The waiter showed us to a table, and we ordered a roast pork plate and soft shelled crabs with rice and tea. We got exactly what we ordered. Not a lettuce leaf extra. No napkins. We forgot to ask. We were lucky there were chairs. The restaurant stays open from 6 am and who knows how long into the night. Probably the same waiters. When do they sleep? They all look old. It's all the hard work. The ancient guy

who just served us tea. ... he's probably only 26. The food was delicious and it turned out that they have a mention in the Michelin Guide. We went back the next day for Dim-Sum and were treated like royalty.

We love travelling by the double-decker trams in Hong Kong. There is one track that goes the length of the city (on the island). They rattle along on 4 wheels with axles that are only about 3 meters apart. They arrive about every 3 minutes and cost one krona and 20 øre for senior citizens. The city is divided up into sections: The dried sea food section, the safety deposit box section, the jade section, the costume section, the exclusive section ... you know, Giorgio Armani, Louis Vuitton, Ralph Blah Blah ... you get the picture.

A lady on the tram heard us wondering about the route and she explained where the tram went. She added (shielding her mouth with her hand) 'It was better when the British were here.'

The next day we took the star ferry to Kowloon and visited the flower market. Wherever we go, people are asking if we need help. (Which we usually do.) Hong Kong people are nice. They seem to ignore you, but as soon as you start looking confused, they immediately offer assistance. They are a great welcome mat for China.

### **Bodufolhudhoo**

This is a little island on the western edge of the Maldives. There is a beautiful wooden ferry that takes you slowly there (6 hours).

There aren't a lot of options on Bodufolhudhoo. There are two main streets that are 200 metres long and which cross at the centre of the island. No matter which direction you go, the result is the same – ocean. Your choice of relationships is also limited because of the very few inhabitants. For example, your mother-in-law, will be a grumpy critical sourpuss. "No, no" says Ahmed, the manager of our tiny hotel. "The older women are just uncertain about strangers and are a bit wary."

The island is 100% Islamic and the number of gay atheists is limited. I think that Islam is restrictive on business. "Ahmed", I say. "You might get more business if a person could order a bottle of wine with dinner or a bottle of beer after swimming." "No, no", says Ahmed, "Westerners drink at home, but when they are on vacation, they don't have to drink." I hadn't thought of the burden aspect.

One evening Ahmed took us out in the open sea where there was a shallow reef and a chance to fish for dinner. We snorkelled in the very colourful coral until the sun set, and then went over to fishing. My line was broken by one fish. Then Ahmed caught a 4 or 5 kilo red snapper. Not long after I got a 1 kg red snapper. Somehow the fish were finding the bait in the dark. We headed home and grilled our catch together with a lobster from one of the neighbours.



## Bandos Island

On our way to Bandos Island we saw a spectacular display of dolphins doing gymnastics in the wake of the ferry. Their bodies would completely leave the water. Then, as a finale, one dolphin came up from below at full throttle and leapt to a height several times its own length. Exhilarating.



On the island of Bandos they take great care to make everything idyllic. They grow orchids in coconut shells that are then placed near the bungalows. Tree shaded paths are bordered with tropical plants.

We went out early and saw several sharks fighting over a plastic bag a meter from shore. This is where we swim, and I would be worried if I had little children. Karin also saw scorpion fish which can be fatal for children.



For adults there is little danger. The sharks are quite shy and the sea life is fascinating. Besides the colourful fish we also saw a hawksbill turtle, eel, feather star, clams, and lobsters.



On our last day we were in the over-water villa where we could step directly into the water and immediately swim with the sea creatures. The lodge sent over a bottle of champagne and a birthday cake. In the late afternoon the weather turned stormy with white caps on the swells. We sat on our sofa and sipped the bubbles while rain beat against the French doors.

Next morning it had quieted down and we snorkelled in the rain followed by a last bubble bath in the Jacuzzi with windows open onto the Indian Ocean

The birthday girl was one big happy smile. The humble baggage-wallah was quite pleased too.

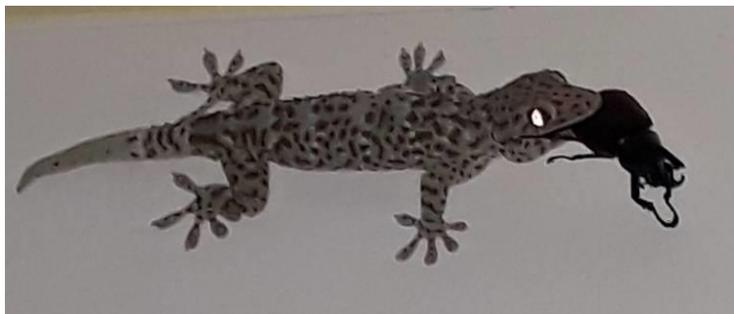
We tried to capture some pictures with our rickety cheap under-water camera.



Clown fish hiding in poisonous sea anemones

Black and white spotted puffer fish

And a few other photos:



Rhinoceros beetle and gecko fighting it out.



Hong Kong Robot



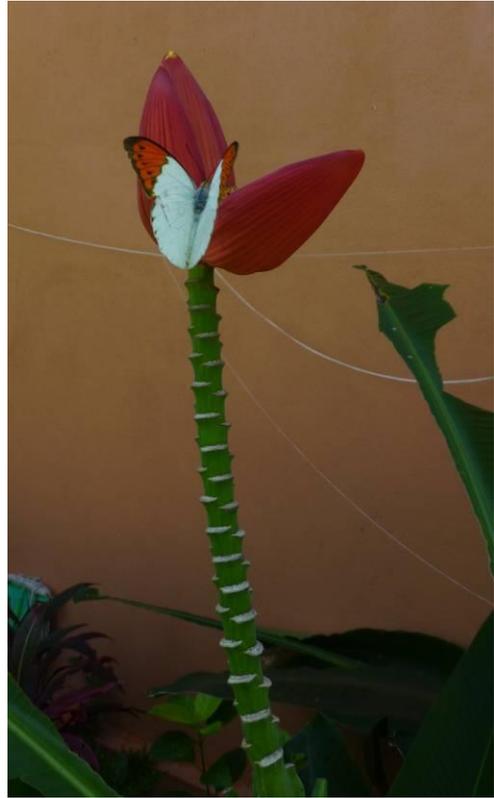
Hong Kong daughters waiting for Mum to close shop



Grey Heron stopping in for breakfast



Oriental Garden Lizard



Orange Tip Butterfly



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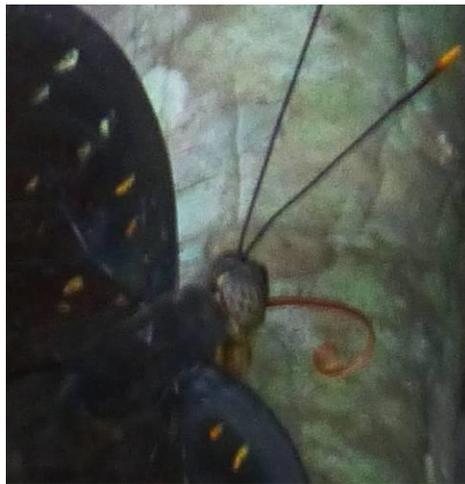
Until next time, Bruce and Karin.

## November

This butterfly (*Lexias pardalis dirteana*) appears to have one red leg! At least that was what I thought. You can see in the fuzzy close up pictures below that it is his proboscis. In the picture on the left you can see the proboscis curled into a tiny ball on the front of his face. Then presto out it uncurls. It is only a couple of centimeters long, but if you think relatively, quite impressive still. With a nose like that you could dust lint off your shoes.



This one seems to have found some rotting fruit. They also feed on nectar. I guess we should consider ourselves lucky that we don't have to eat through the nose.



With all the talk about the proboscis, I know that many of you (especially the older ones) now feel inspired to tell the story of the Hawkmoth. Well, I'm sorry to beat you to the punch: When a flower was found in Madagascar whose nectar was stored at the bottom of a 30 cm long tube, Darwin famously predicted that there must be an animal that could reach it. This animal was later discovered to be the Hawkmoth with a proboscis 30cm long! I always thought that evolution could not be a science because it lacked a crucial ingredient: that once a theory was formed it couldn't

predict what would happen. More the fool me. Darwin's prediction came true 21 years after his death.

We have been a bit busy. Karin and Mike are working on a book. They have all the pentagon classified documents for the war in Vietnam. It is possible to see how many bombs were dropped. More bombs have been dropped on SOUTH Vietnam than any other country (some 3 million tons). Ever. The second most bombed country is Laos and the third most is North Vietnam. Actually on a per capita basis the Lao are the most bombed people (.86 tons per person) – even though no one was at war with them. Knowing that about 30% of the cluster bombs did not detonate, it is possible to estimate the size of the removal job.

The bombs were almost exclusively American.



“Mr and Mrs Hornbill”

I have finished a few paintings. Here is one (above):

Great Mormon Butterflies during their mating rituals. Amazing sexual dimorphism where the male is a dark blue black and the female with lighter colours but both have the red dots on the wings.

There is a lot of fluttering and movement, and they travelled quite extensively. I chased after while taking their pictures. They didn't seem to mind me at all.



I needed to get rid of the excess oil in a tuna can so I poured it into the brush by the kitchen. 2P, the dog, showed up and licked the sandy soil. Next thing I knew she had dug a hole a foot deep. Looking for the source. You never know, maybe it will be a 'gusher'.



She is called 2P because she was born with two patches. She also has two pleading, dark eyes that follow your every bite at dinner time. She would be a great poster child for a disabled dog charity. Her disadvantage is that she is in good health. That's where the other dog, Yard, comes in. Yard is deformed having been born with only 3 legs (Which is why she is called 'Yard'... get it?). She hobbles around with her twisted body looking a little like Richard III. When she barks, it is usually one exhausted 'woof'. They make a great team for getting sympathy snacks.

If we were able to confer with the insects about the worth of Mike's study of unexploded ordinance, they would be none too enthusiastic.

The guy on the right might have a few comments .... "What about the insects that were killed by the bombs? Not a word, and I've read his entire work. In my opinion, we with six legs were completely excluded. Ignored. Why? Because we're small?? Can you look me in the eye and say we don't matter? Be careful, my friend, I am a lethal killing machine. Thanks for the inclusion in the newsletter though. A word of advice: There are way too many butterfly pictures. They have the brains of a gnat "



Lethal Killing Machine

Geckos are very clingy. If you want to know, if your clingy boyfriend is a gecko look for the pupils. The gecko's pupil is a vertical line.



Tokay Gecko.



Wanna dance...?



We were in downtown Vientiang to get a visa extension, and met a German couple doing the same. Unlike the usual tourists , they had travelled in their camper through Russia and entered China in the north west. The couple were surprised by their reception. Their camper was impounded and they were told that they needed to find a place to stay while it was inspected. They saw a hostel nearby, but were told foreigners could not stay there, they would need to find lodging in a city 100 km away which they could reach by taxi. When they arrived there, they went to a restaurant and ordered food. They could not have a knife to eat. Knives were not allowed in this part of China. There was only one knife in the kitchen and it was chained to the wall. Their impression of the populace was that people were not happy. The air was filled with a yellow pollution from the worst industry – cement factories and the like. The couple wanted badly to leave this miserable place as soon as possible, but when they got back to the border the next day, they were told that the inspection was not complete and they would need to come back in several days. So they returned to the city. By taxi. 100 kms.

**Kingpin** is a supervillain appearing in American comic books

So here is the explanation. This area is populated by a group I had never heard of before called Uighurs. They are moslem. It is reported that every family has had one or more of its members put in 'vocational training centers' where they receive 'thought transformation'. There are today over one million Uighurs in these centers. According to the Chinese, Uighurs are considered to be extremist because of the halal diet, refusing to watch state TV, and preventing their children from receiving state education. The vocational training includes swearing allegiance to President Xi **Jinping**.

What a difference from the helpful Chinese people we met in Hong Kong. President Xi **Jinping** should try 'halal' – it means 'permissible' in Islam.

Why are the Chinese so harsh in their treatment of this group of people? It seems to be an attempt to get the Uighurs to abandon their ethnic identities and become Han Chinese clones. Then, if everyone behaves in the same way and follows all the rules, you can control what will happen. There is no longer any risk that things will go wrong. Like washing your mind 100 times a day. It's called an Obsessive Compulsive Disorder. They should consider treatment. Controlling the future is doomed to fail no matter how powerful you are. You might as well throw coins in a fountain. Instead of making people unhappy.

This couple's scary story was told under very pleasant circumstances in a Lao café. They eventually got their camper back and were very happy to get out of China and will NEVER go back.

## Luang Prabang

The road to Luang Prabang is through very steep mountains. They were largely made up of limestone, shale and sandstone that was a seabed before being forced up by tectonic action. With erosion, all kinds of pinacles, columns and spikes formed. Notice here the clear patch on the mountain side. This rock is not very solid. When plants grow on it, they will loosen the crust and when it is weak enough, a great patch covered in vegetation will slide off into the valley below leaving a bald spot. As we drive along, our road passes through one landslide after another. On one of the fresh ones the steam shovels and trucks were digging a path for traffic.



Villages cling to the mountain side, between the road and the drop off. It is quite narrow and we pass within feet of a mother combing her daughter's hair, a sister buttoning her little brother's shirt, a family sitting down to breakfast and children in their light blue shirts and black trousers starting off to school.



The road is not always paved and we kick up a good deal of dust – especially the trucks which with their 22 wheels (12 at the back bed, 8 in the front bed and 2 for the cab). So if a person were

to hang up laundry, it would only take one truck and it would need to be washed again. In these areas we see that the school kids shirts have a reddish tinge.

Mike tells us he was waiting for the clearing of a landslide that had taken out half of a village. Those who had survived had set up tables and were selling fruit and soft drinks to the stranded motorists. I guess the mind set of people living so precariously is different – like the animals in the jungle. Things die. Life goes on. Maybe the cars will buy oranges.

It was a fascinating trip through these mountains, but also a relief (we didn't kill anybody) to arrive

in Luang Prabang. This is a quite religious town. I counted 46 Wats (Buddhist churches) with their 7 headed snake statues.

One of the symbols for the Lao monarchy is the 3 headed elephant. I don't think these are examples of anatomical confusion as much as it is an attempt to be mysterious.

The Mighty Muddy Mekong flows next to Luang Prabang which provide the delicious river weed and huge catfish that can be bought in the market.



The small city has become a world heritage site. I have begun to think that this may be an honour with drawbacks. It could become a new Venice which is inundated with so many tourists (60 million/year) that the local population has deserted. It must be a trial for the Buddhist monks who have their picture taken every minute. It is hard to forget oneself and become one with the universe when someone with blue hair says, 'Oh look. There is one of those monks.'

That is all for now.

Until next time

Bruce and Karin



Here are a few pictures:



Fascinating piece of Lao art.



Small but beautiful



friends



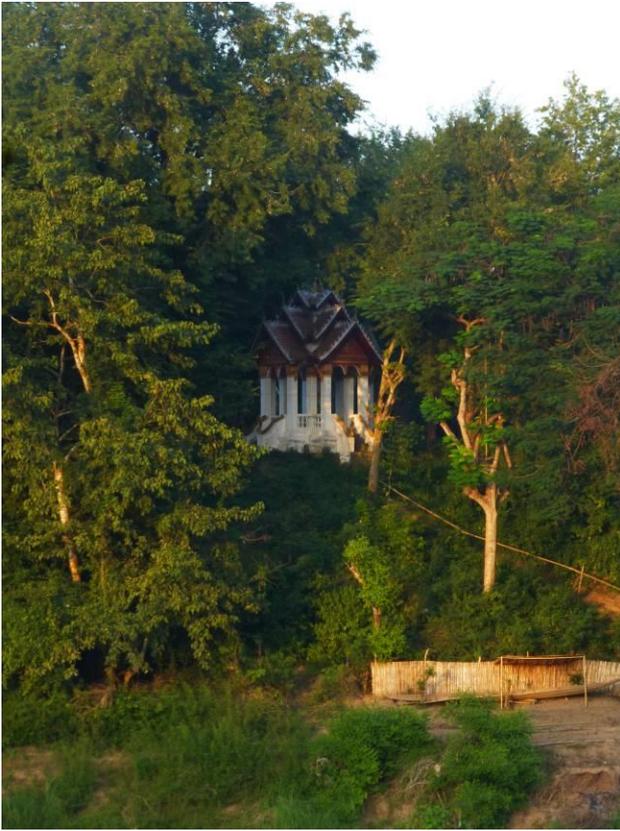
Hiding in bushes



Playground



Fishers on the Mekong



Temple



So many different berries on one tree



Orange Cruiser



Rhinoceros beetle



Damsel Fly (Unchanged for 300 million years)



Flat Faced Longhorn Beetle (Cerambycidae lamiinae)



Lantern fly (Pyrops candelaria) They use their proboscis to puncture bark to get at sap.



Female leaf insect. (the males have wings)



Asian black-spined toad (Bufo Melanostictus) Has poison (on the skin) that causes heart to slow down (bradycardia) . Do not lick this deadly animal



This frog is not even moving one little toe in an attempt to be inconspicuous.



Asian Swallow Tailed Moth