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Eating our way through southeast Asia: A cruise to celebrate 30 years... and to eat

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By David Hammond

I met my wife, Carolyn Berg at Kalamazoo College in Michigan. We both chose this small, liberal arts school largely because of its foreign study program.

We've both always loved travel and planned to do a lot of it.

But life intervened, and after we married, we became distracted by jobs, family and all the usual pursuits that pull one away from the path that, when young, seemed more clear.

To celebrate our 30th wedding anniversary, we booked passage on the Zaandam, a ship in the Holland America Line. This 14-day cruise docked at a number of ports in Southeast Asia, including Singapore, Thailand, Cambodia, Vietnam, China and Hong Kong.

"The idea of long-distance cruising had never really appealed to me," interjects Carolyn. "Rowboat, sailboat, yes, but the thought of trusting my fate to one of those behemoths I had seen docked on other vacations didn't call out to me. When I discovered that the Zaandam was about one-fourth the size of those water-borne high

rises, I was willing to take the plunge (so to speak)."

Cruises, like golf and Sudoku, never much appealed to me, either. In this part of the world, however, it seemed very convenient to have all our stuff on a traveling hotel that moved about, enabling us to get on and off and pretty much shepherding us every step of the way through countries filled with people who spoke languages neither of us had ever studied — and prepared foods neither of us had ever eaten.

Otak-otak in Singapore: Love at First Bite

Singapore was much more of a food city than I'd imagined. The cultural influences of indigenous Malaysians mingle with foods and cultural forces of Chinese, English and Indian immigrants, making for a remarkably multidimensional stew of flavors and ingredients. Singapore's National Museum devotes its first gallery to the foods of this city: sticky rice, various noodle preparations, soups and grilled meats.

Singapore is home to a number of "hawker markets," collections of small vendors offering street food that seem a more authentic reflection of the local culture than one might find in restaurants.

In Tiong Bahru, one of Singapore's many hawker communities, I was knocked out by the immense range of foods, many of which I'd never seen. My favorites were otak-otak, a mackerel paste seasoned with chilies and grilled in a banana leaf (fantastic), and bee hoon, a mess of noodles, egg and vegetables (simple and satisfying).

"With about 1,400 cruisers and 600 crew," Carolyn adds, "the Zaandam was a comfortable and friendly place to live for two weeks. The food was tasty and familiar. There were things to do and new friends to meet, but the best was to sit on a deck chair reading or get some exercise walking the deck (4 laps/mile) while the surrounding sea filled my senses. On the ship, getting from one place to another was the quiet relaxing vacation that energized us for the busy excitement of exploring new places."

Eating butt and beat-up salad in Bangkok

I'd seen "Chicken Butt" advertised in the night market at Koasiung, Taiwan, and wandering around Bangkok one afternoon, I spotted a vendor selling a number of grilled items, including small skewers of what looked like a chicken's triangular tail section. Back home, this part of the chicken usually goes into the stock pot, but I discovered that it holds a lot of fatty flavor. Balanced with hot sauce, it proved an excellent street snack.

Eating raw vegetables is risky in countries where our foreign bodies are not accustomed to native bacteria. Still, I had to try green papaya salad, a signature Thai preparation of raw fruit, chilies and other vegetables. I ordered a bowl from a vendor who seemed like she had a lot of business, then watched as she whacked the hell out of the thin-cut papaya strands, mixing in chilies, tomatoes and small, edible limes with salt, all the while continuing to flog it all vigorously in a small mortar and pestle. The beating she issued to the ingredients released the flavors and encouraged them to marry, creating a tender, super-flavorful salad.

"Seeing what we could of Southeast Asia was our goal," observes Carolyn, "and we did have an enticing taste of that part of the world. I'll leave the food review to David, but even in our short visits, there was so much more than snacks to discover. In a one- or two-day stop, there's no better way to learn about a city's history and culture than to visit its city museum. In the seven cities we visited, we usually saw the old colonial center, open-air day market or night street market, visited a temple or two and wandered the old streets for as much time as we had. Our sense of each place's individual personality was greatly enriched whenever we could get to a museum."

I always wonder how the simple Buddha would feel about the grandeur of temples built in his honor (probably the same as the simple Jesus would feel about Vatican splendor). Must say, though, the Grand Palace in Bangkok was an almost out-of-body experience — the detail, the blinding amount of gold, the architectural dimension, all of that brought us to another place. Perhaps that's the idea. Anyway, I forgot about eating for about half an hour.

Chowing to Cambodia

From the deck of the Zaandam, as we moved through the Bay of Thailand, Cambodia came out of the mists, ghostly, as the sun rose. Must admit, my initial perception of this country was shaped by films like *The Killing Fields*, and the lingering evil that was Pol Pot and his Khmer Rouge haunted my first hours on shore. I kept imagining the horrors that must have taken place on the ground I walked across. I remember feeling the same way at Auschwitz. Here, as there, were monsters.

Such dark spirits were quickly exorcised as we walked into the vast marketplace in Sihanoukville. The smiles of the children and the pride of their parents, some of whom served me fresh seafood and sausage, put a sunnier cast on the day. This market is raw by American standards, but to me it was full of life, with people eating bowls of noodles at bars set next to coops filled with live chickens, floors covered with scuttling ducks, and big tanks filled with fish so fresh I saw several leap from their confines to the floor, from which they were quickly plucked and returned to the tank.

I waited until I saw a woman trot freshly cooked fish from the fire to the serving table. I grabbed one. It was some kind of skate, I think, and delicious.

Voracious in Vietnam

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I skipped breakfast on the Zaandam, so by the time we got to Saigon, I was hungry (just the way I planned it).

Compared to Sihanoukville, the main market in Saigon seemed almost as sanitary as an operating room, well-lit and ventilated, with freshly washed stalls and big buckets of soapy water where dishes were regularly washed.

We ordered a bowl of pho, the signature soup of Vietnam, which is advertised on small signs along many country roads and city streets. It's prepared and eaten everywhere.

We tend to think of our first versions of a food as "authentic," the real thing, the way it should be prepared. My first taste of pho was on Argyle Street in Chicago, and in a recent article about Forest Park's Saigon Pho, I mentioned that the broth in this local version seemed less funky — and so maybe less authentic — than versions I'd had Uptown in Chicago. Having now eaten pho in Saigon, I can say with some assurance that the broth we had at Saigon Pho on Madison Street was very close to the broth we had in the city of Saigon, Vietnam — closer, in fact, than what I'd had on Argyle.

Happy ending in Hong Kong

"I was amazed," Carolyn recalls, "by the building boom in every city we visited. I'm sure anyone who hasn't been to that part of the world in 10 or 20 years wouldn't recognize where they were in any of the major cities. There are new high-rises, surprising architecture, and cranes everywhere. In Hong Kong, they joke that soon it won't be an island anymore. They've done so much land reclamation from the sea, it just may join mainland China."

In Hong Kong, we enjoyed a favorite of the city, Hainan chicken, which is a whole poached chicken, cut in strips perpendicular to the spine, served with rice, a side of chicken broth, and usually a side sauce or two (typically a ginger and a hot sauce). This, to me, seemed almost universal comfort food: non-aggressive and elementally satisfying.

Hong Kong, in fact, is big on comfort food — like noodles. We had noodles a few times, and there were lots of different kinds: crunchy, soft to the point of wateriness, toothsome, hard. Lots.

And that's pretty much the takeaway from most foreign countries we visited: there's lots of ways to prepare the same basic food. Given diverse geographies and a few thousand years, people will evolve many ways to make the same thing — food, a family, a civilization — differently.

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