Chapter VI

Impressions of Albania and two former Russian ‘stans’ (Azerbaijan and Tajikistan)

Different areas of the developing world are distinguished by the various international aid agencies and especially so by the World Bank and the European Commission. These organisations are always very particular for a candidate applying for a position as a consultant as it is expected that he/she will have relevant experience of a particular zone or region. Thus, for the European Union you have the ALA region which covers Asia and Latin America. The Phare region covered assistance to the Eastern European States in transition to joining the European Union. With the recent accession of Romania and Bulgaria to make a total of 27 European member states the Phare has almost been wound up. Turkey, if it ever is to join the European Union, will do so under a separate accession treaty.

A significant region is TACIS which covers the Russian Federation as well as the former states of the Soviet Union. Over my career I have only visited three of the countries involved under the Phare or Tacis programmes of the EU. Certainly, these three countries differed very substantially from the countries of Africa, South Asia or Southeast Asia where I usually found myself.

Albania is undoubtedly European but it has a long and separate tradition and culture. The picture below is of a Byzantine monastery certainly built before the 10th century A.D. While I was a student and in my early twenties Albania was both remote and forbidding. Its communist leadership was greatly suspicious of any overtures coming from the European Union. It was equally suspicious of the Communist regime in Moscow. For a while it was a close ally of Communist China. In what appeared to me to be almost an orgy of suspicion there was a system whereby every Albanian citizen under communism was required to resubmit his or her ‘curriculum vitae’ on an annual basis to the authorities. This was not the normal curriculum vitae. Each citizen in preparing his/her CV was expected to cite at least two of his fellow citizens to be investigated by the secret police. It was very difficult for someone like me coming from the Western world to be able to relate to the genuine fears, anxieties and suspicions of many of the people I met.

Formerly, Albania had a strong representation of both the Orthodox Christian and Moslem religions. Under communism any display of religion was forbidden with severe penalties. Every effort was made by the authorities to stamp out the various faiths. This never works. Whereas I have my own views on the validity of religion I will always defend my fellow citizen’s rights to pursue his or her religious life as a human right. In Albania however it was interesting because while normally Christians and Moslems rarely meet and almost never mix socially – there it was commonplace to have marriage unions across the religious spectrum. A friend who interpreted for me was a Christian or was formerly of a Christian family and was now married to a Muslim. They had been married under communism when secularism was
the order of the day. I still have a statuette this lady gave me. Looking at it I’m not quite sure whether it represents an angel or a houri – one of the nine virgins a good Muslim encounters when he passes into Paradise!

Of course religion at the time of my mission was only being rediscovered. The sensitivities as between adherents of the different faiths had not yet re-surfaced. Perhaps it will never surface in Albania. That might be all for the good.

Another peculiarity attaching to Albania was the mark of recent 19th-century and pre- World War I history. Before that time the state of Albania was much more extensive but parts of it were whittled away by the Habsburgs and by the Serbs and later the Yugoslavians. So much had been lost in Kosovo where there still continues to be a major ethnic problem with Serbia. Under communism and based on this earlier encroachment of its territories the government developed a pathological fear of future invasions by its more powerful neighbours. In strengthening its defences, wherever there was open land in strategic areas or along the coast these have been filled and disfigured with massive constructions, defensive forts, built by forced labour to repel an invading force. These installations disfigure the country-side and when I saw them were very, very extensive. If they have been since demolished and removed it would have taken enormous resources to do it.

A further peculiarity was the existence of an Albanian Mafia which was new to me. My local colleagues informed me that this Mafia was superior to the Italian and was well-established across western European countries. They particularly cited their location in London. These mafias specialised in trafficking young people - but young women especially into brothels across Europe. They even tricked girls from local Albanian families. They were into drugs
too. I remember stories as to how they used fast motorboats that were located in ports such as Durres, which could travel much faster than the Italian patrol boats sent out to intercept them.

Another feature which a European from the West invariably encountered was a sense of jealousy which came to the surface very frequently after a couple of glasses of wine. The local businessmen especially who were normally happy to co-operate with expatriates once it was to their benefit were highly critical of the fact that they had been left behind by the progress made post-war by the West. Sometimes this became unpleasantly emotional over a meal. After a couple of instances I grew to recognise what was coming and quickly insisted that the subject should be changed - or else I departed.

On the other hand I was impressed by the way the planning apparatus moved on illegal dwellings which had been built in the inner city - sizeable apartment blocks. One Monday morning while I was there the authorities came out with bulldozers and levelled a complete neighbourhood. Another impression had to do with shopping in a bazaar which to all extent and purposes could have been in Pakistan but wasn't - it was in Europe. These fellow-Europeans were poor and were bartering amongst each other or with me as a Westerner. The surprise was that these were Westerners like me.

I hope things have changed by now. I was there I think in 1999 fairly shortly after the country had been opened up to the West. At immigration as we came into the customs area we were almost pistol whipped by border police holding their revolvers in their hands. I've been in many countries - this was the first experience of this sort of KVD approach and it spoke volumes to me about the police culture! We say here in Ireland regarding the police that

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1 Years later I saw a similar approach adopted in Dhaka, Bangladesh!
while you can respect them - you don't have to trust them! In terms of public trust the Irish Gardai and their general carry on with the citizenry are as lambs compared to their Albanian counterparts – and rightly so!

From a tourist point of view there are many interesting archaeological remains. Albania is situated along the ancient Roman road to Greece and the East. I came across a milestone inscribed with perfectly legible Roman characters giving the distance as well as the name of the then Roman Emperor. We visited a Roman town which had not changed a great deal apart from the inevitable gun emplacement, which disfigured the setting to some degree. The coastal areas of Albania have been fought over for hundreds of years between the Venetians and the Turks - and I was told - with much mixing of bloodlines.

I don't seem to have taken many photographs of Albania - or at least to have preserved many. On the day the picture above was taken of me and a former World Bank colleague from Pakistan I had met we had hired a local taxi one weekend to drive us to see some historical parts of Albania. A bizarre incident occurred on our return to the capital. It was about twilight when we were stopped by a police patrol. The driver was taken out and questioned. To our horror we saw the police force him back over the bonnet and slap him repeatedly across the face. He replied something or other. They released him, dusted him down, and patted him on the back. Without a bother he got back into the car and we drove off.

In a mood of some concern and mixed with relief we asked him what had happened and what had he said to the police to change the situation so radically. He replied in a sort of throwaway fashion “I told them your friend was the American Ambassador”. My friend wore a beard and did look distinguished. I was grateful to him for saving us from what might have been an unpleasant incident.

I’m conscious, very conscious, that so far I have not painted a very exalted picture of Albania. In truth, I found it somewhat intimidating. There were interesting places to go and see in Tirana including the Palace of the People and the great central square. I stayed in a huge hotel looking out directly on to it. I also went for enjoyable walks in a wooded park not far from the town centre. No, it was certainly not all doom and gloom.
It surprises me that it is more than ten years since I was in the country. I suppose when you reach the age of sixty five and past it - time seems to move very quickly. It must have been shortly after I had come home from Pakistan from working with the United Nations. I had good relations with and contacts in the International Labour Office (ILO). An Australian pal of mine with the Irish name of Duffy asked me whether I would be interested in working with the relevant vocational training ministries in Albania to develop a model covering “recognition of prior experience”. I see from a record I’ve searched out that the overall objective of the mission's exercise was to develop a framework for a national VET skills standard system for Albania suitable to a market economy. Further, the task was to define the appropriate model and to guarantee the participation of the social partners in the process. The exercise culminated in an ILO workshop in Tirana in October 1999. Interestingly, the findings of the exercise were to be validated and accepted by employers and agreed by the government authorities.

The participants were an interesting bunch of people. There was the old guard of officials and academics who were plainly uncomfortable with this novel concept of a market economy. They shared with us that they found the free market economy to be a most difficult concept.
I felt a sense of sadness for some of the professors present from this group. They had been respected and appointed to senior academic positions under the old regime. Now they were apparently out of their depth and unable to relate to the new developments which were taking place - not just in Albania but all across the former Communist territories of Eastern Europe. In contrast to these dignified older people there was the new generation, again the young men and women, who had started their own businesses. I found these people could be brash, demanding and very, very intolerant of the older group. They demanded to be listened to and assumed that we would propose them for any foreign trips or positions or benefits funded by the project. They reminded me very much of similar young people - some educated in the best of the American universities - I had earlier encountered in Iran before the fall of the Shah and in Syria where there was a similar level of antagonism between the expectations of the young and the traditional roles of the older people in society.

So although the presentations continued on parallel tracks - there was a substantial difference to the respective trajectory speeds between the two groups. Frankly, I much preferred the
older men and women for their sincerity, dignity and attempts to come to terms with the new situation. They were often abused in the workshops by crass remarks and criticisms from the younger people - some of which was quite unpleasant. At the same time the older generation as represented had benefited from the earlier harsh structures of the former Communist system. But the younger groups also had their origins in that awful regime. It was just that they transferred more easily and had evolved into a market-driven middle-class. I wasn't aware of any dissidents or people present who had been persecuted under the old regime. I suppose they hadn't survived.

The workshop had its lighter moments. Just before it commenced my Australian colleague shared with me his good news that he would leave during the first days to travel to Amsterdam to get married to his long-term Dutch partner. While he regretted to spring this news on me he was anxious that his bosses in the ILO shouldn't know about it. I was intrigued to find him - a man in his mid-60s - so romantically in love and so full of ardour and enthusiasm. I was charmed. It meant though that I would have to face an audience on my own. I knew well the price I would have to pay with the boredom and ennui that could ensue - especially from the younger groups. Unfortunately- I am usually right in forecasting the down side of things - I was right in this instance.

There was some relief. A Hollywood actor, Michael Douglas, known internationally and married to a celebrated film star -I forget her name - had been appointed an honorary UN ambassador. As I was using the only sizeable lecture hall in the UNDP building I was requested, if I wouldn't mind, could I vacate the hall for a half a day to allow the celebrity to address the local staff and local celebrities? Reluctantly, I agreed but I said I thought - given the high profile of the Ambassador at Large - that I expected the speeches would be long and that perhaps the best thing to do would be for them to take over the lecture hall for the whole day. They agreed with some obvious relief. At least it took the pressure off me for a day.

I continue from time to time to follow the course of politics and the progress towards the accession of Albania to become a member state of the European Union. It's a complex scenario - made particularly so - by the fact that the newly recognised state or national entity of Kosovo has a majority population of Albanian extraction. It’s part of the Greater Albania of old. But trafficking still continues and I suppose will continue until Albania emerges from its present level of poverty. For all that it deserves to join the European Union.

A slight misunderstanding in Azerbaijan

A long time ago a colleague had befriended a lady from Baku in Azerbaijan. Over the years they had maintained a desultory correspondence. One day almost out of the blue the company was invited to submit a tender for an education project there and funded I think by the Asian Development Bank. We thought it a worthwhile lead to follow-up. Eventually, we managed to organise visas and found ourselves on the plane to Azerbaijan.

The next day we called on the friend. She was now working as the private secretary to the President of the Azerbaijan Academy of Sciences. For a fortnight we were his personal guests. The friend had made a mistake and had introduced us as Westerners with a lot of money to invest in suitable Azerbaijani projects. It was embarrassing. It was difficult. In
addition, we spoke no Russian and our counterparts spoke very little English. None the less we were taken on tours of the country either by the President himself or by one of his trusted - and armed - entourage. On a daily basis, experts from the Academy made presentations to us on a whole range of developments; they covered the design of ports, geology, mineral extraction and a hundred and one and one other things. En route, I sat for hours in the front of the four wheel drive listening to broken English in a monotone while my colleague dozed off in the back seat. My colleague being the intelligent lady she is, had summed up the situation and decided that she would pass herself off as my private secretary. That meant that I was the target and had to listen and endure hours of presentations and ask polite questions on topics which were way above any technical knowledge I ever possessed.

The President of the Azerbaijan Academy of Sciences, his wife, bodyguard and my colleague at the ancient fortifications of Baku. The little man carried the revolver.

We both would have much preferred to have admitted the misunderstanding which had happened and apologise and then take to our heels for the airport. Unfortunately, that wasn't possible for us. Things are different in a centrally organised economy. In many ways and although we had booked our hotel and our flights we were the guests of the President of the Academy and he would determine what we did, where we went and when we could depart. It was personalised so we certainly didn't want to offend him and we didn't want to cause a problem for my colleague's friend.

To compound the situation the President and his wife and colleagues though obviously interested in having a share of whatever action that might emerge – to their own standards and in their own way - they were extremely pleasant to us. So there was no alternative but to hanging in and continuing with an extensive round of meetings with ministers, advisers and the like.

The whole area is a very sensitive one politically. It is certainly no coincidence that Armenia, a Russian proxy, has been supported implicitly by the Russians to invade and take over
Nagorno-Karabakh, a territory within Azerbaijan with an Armenian majority. In this way the Russians are seeking to continue to overawe and control the oil politics of Azerbaijan. We visited one of the Nagorno-Karabakh refugee camps organised by the Azerbaijani government. Sadly, these refugees were being used as a pawn in the confrontation between American-backed Azerbaijan and Russian-backed Armenia. Nor does it all stop here. The Caspian basin is disputed more ominously, by Iran and by Turkmenistan on the southern and eastern shores.

In discussion with ministers and their ilk it was quite apparent that there was no love lost between them and their counterparts in Armenia, a number of whom were known to them personally since the old Soviet era. At the same time while they complained about the suffering of the refugees from Nagorno-Karabakh they were not prepared to take steps to improve the lives of these unfortunate people. It was their opinion that it was better to show the world this suffering as a means of galvanising world opinion instead of trying to implement something that would make the refugees’ lives somewhat less horrible.

I suppose in this they imitate the situation that one occasionally finds in the West Bank, in Gaza or in the refugee camps in Jordan or Syria. It's cynical and I don't think it's very effective. It polarises opinion and contributes mightily towards developing a next-generation of terrorists or freedom fighters - all depending on your point of view.

We visited one of the refugee camps and were surrounded by children everywhere we went. I was introduced to the local poet. He desperately wanted to have his book of poems published. I offered him I think a twenty Euro note and was somewhat taken aback by his reaction. He obviously considered I was a wealthy Westerner with money to burn. It was clear I had insulted him before the locals. He was mightily offended with such a small offering and raged in broken English between hurt pride and distaste. I was very taken aback by the experience. There are sometimes I’ve discovered I can do nothing right however much I try. This was one of such times.
I found Azerbaijan and especially the old city centre of Baku very interesting from an historic point of view. It’s been of central importance to the region for a long, long time – long before the advent of the Soviet Union or the discovery of oil. Baku is the major trading centre of the region and has been for hundreds or indeed thousands of years. It was situated on one of the Old Silk Routes to China. The old part of the city with its cut stone fortifications and caravanserai is singularly impressive. So is it’s Arabic-style architecture – but there is a difference.

Azerbaijan borders on the Caspian basin and is rich in oil. They say the Caspian basin has the second-highest oil reserves in the world. In some parts of the world I’ve heard people say that oil is a curse. As with any oil producing Texan-style region there are elements which are larger-than-life. The contrast between our arrival in Baku airport and our departure was particularly striking. We arrived at about midnight and were subjected to all sorts of bureaucratic delays and demands. We left escorted by a large gentleman with a forty five revolver at his waist. All formalities were completed within five minutes! It's the only time in a long career of travelling that I've enjoyed such courtesies.

Certainly, Azerbaijan was one of the pioneer countries in oil development. But the discovery of oil hasn’t been an unmitigated success. As mentioned earlier there is a continuing raw interface between it and its former dominant partner, Russia. I was amazed to learn of the punitive action and the massacre unleashed on the city of Baku by Mr. Gorbachev during the final months of the old Soviet Union - somewhere in the late 80s or early 90s. I hadn’t heard of it before. Indeed I was taken to the graves of the martyrs sited above the city and looking out over the Caspian Sea. I think most official visitors are brought to see this.
The country is of high strategic importance. Because of its great wealth potential it has been wooed by the West. In the photograph above you will be able to make out units of the Azerbaijani Navy. These ships have been provided by the United States as a counterweight to the Soviet threat. How they were built or transported there I never found out. In previous times all oil pipelines from the Caspian passed through the Soviet Union and were dominated by the Russian authorities. This has changed and there is an oil pipeline constructed from Azerbaijan going through Georgia to one of Turkey’s Mediterranean ports which bypasses Russia completely.

Our mentors were very pleased to bring us to see some curious hieroglyphics carved in rock along a deserted portion of the coast. They reminded me somewhat of the Buddhist pilgrims’ carvings – I think they were called petroglyphs on the cliff faces on the Old Silk Road along the River Indus from Tahsila near Islamabad into China. Thor Heyerdahl of Kontiki fame has researched these petroglyphs and found them to be of great significance. I imagined the carvings to be derived from some ancient Greeks blown off-course on the return from Troy. I especially liked the hairdo of what seems to be an important member of the crew!
The ancient hieroglyphs inscribed on stones along the Caspian coast of Azerbaijan and their antiquity

The existence of the oil rich reserves is very obvious. All along the coast there was evidence of old rusting oil installation equipment. Once we were taken out for a trip on the Caspian and sailed between huge blotches of oil which seemed to contaminate the surface of the sea for as far as the eye could see.

I would be very happy to have another opportunity to visit Azerbaijan. Although it is Muslim there is a strongly defined secular culture. At the same time I could see it as part of an oil-rich region liable to explode with huge ethnic passions at anytime.
Although only for a short time it was a very interesting experience. We hadn’t an idea of how our hosts saw the purpose of our visit. We were immensely impressed by the professionalism displayed by the members of the Academy of Sciences.

We never found out what sort of introduction had been conveyed to the President of the Academy on our behalf. But we learned something about the main characters and their political roles in the transition from the old Soviet situation.

### Tajikistan

Tajikistan is a unique country with some 93% of its land area mountainous. It borders Afghanistan. It\(^2\) has a history of being the most unstable Central Asian country since its independence in 1991. It suffered a period of a long and ferocious civil war in the 1990s, which further impoverished an already poor country. During winter much of the terrain outside the main cities is inaccessible.

“Confronted since the peace has been brokered in 1997 with a few major attempts to destabilise or overthrow the regime, the situation remains still potentially volatile. Furthermore, the possible implications of the planned ISAF troops' drawdown from Afghanistan by the end of 2014 and potential shifts in international policies are hardly addressed. There is a Constitution, which provides for a multiparty political system and, on paper, has most of the functioning institutions of a democratic society. However, in reality, the President and his ruling political party continue to dominate political life and maintain effective control of both civil authorities and security forces. There is no effective division of powers and particularly no independent judiciary. A system of checks and balances, therefore, does not function. The President has effectively been in power since 1992 and has been reconfirmed in his position after the Presidential elections, which took place in November 2013.

A large proportion of the population are vulnerable to poor living conditions, inadequate health and education prospects, and a lack of sustainable economic livelihood. Meanwhile external migration has gathered momentum, with remittances in recent years reported as more than 40% of GDP, the highest in the world.

Corruption continues to hamper democratic and social reform. Civil society is still very much in its infancy, with NGOs mainly implementing projects rather than lobbying on specific issues”.

The capital, Dushanbe is an unusual city. It vaguely resembles an East European city in appearance. There is a lot of poverty: from the way the people dress to the dilapidated appearance of many residential buildings. There were few modern looking automobiles. Much of the centre of Dushanbe was built by German prisoners of war after the Second World War. I was told indeed that some of the German prisoners had married into the local community and continued to live in the city even though it was possible for them to return to Germany following agreements long after the Second World War had finished.

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\(^2\) In the following paragraphs I quote from a Terms of Reference forwarded to me in recent times with an invitation to submit my candidature for participation on a forthcoming mission.
I have often speculated about the mentality of those German prisoners. First of all it was surprising to see in parts of this modern city such beautiful official buildings in classic architectural styles with columns and capitals - all obviously recollected by an architect or architects from their studies in pre-war Germany. I suppose many of these young men were as much victims as torturers. I suppose they were either recruited or forced to join Hitler's Wehrmacht. They had been through the horrors of the Russian front. Probably many of them had participated in the burnings and other atrocities against the civilian populations. Then following defeat at Stalingrad or some similar battle-field they had been subjected to all the hatred, vengeance and mistreatment meted out by the Russians. Without a language and living in such difficult wintry terrains they must have long lost any modicum of self-respect. They must have suffered and felt abandoned and forgotten by their families and loved ones they’d left behind in Germany.

Survivors over a period probably received progressively more lenient treatment. Then Stalin wanted to create a beautiful city in the mountains. This was the chance for some professionals to revisit their former pre-war activities and experiences and with the comrades to translate them into these very dignified classical designs. It's always interesting to speculate about the need for self-rehabilitation.

The project
The immediate and overarching sense of the education sector in Tajikistan is that of slow and steady decay. The strong legacy of education provision established when Tajikistan was part of the USSR have not sustained, as a result “today’s students are receiving a lower quality education compared to their parents’ generation”.

I was working on a vocational training project funded by SIDA of Sweden though the UNDP. The Tajiks are the poorest population of the old Soviet Union nations or as is now more properly known the Confederation of Independent States (CIS). Every year in early spring hundreds of thousands of them migrate to Moscow and the Russian Federation in search of temporary work – much like the taty-hookers of Donegal who went to Scotland for seasonal work on farms in the early part of the last century.

Their lives in the Russian Federation were said to be very difficult indeed. At the frontiers they were ripped off by the border police on both sides. In Russia itself they lived furtive lives; they are looked down upon and abused and the work they managed to find was the lowest of the low. The UN organisation which looks after such migration has documented horrible situations of abuse and rip-offs by Mafia types inside the Russian Federation. So it was a very humanitarian departure for the UNDP supported by Swedish Sida to begin to tackle these inequalities and abuses through setting up a basic level of training in areas and trades where a demand was identified across in the Russian Federation. Migrants graduating from the basic training provided, both men and women, should have been in a better position to obtain semi-skilled jobs which would be further up the social ladder as well as better paid.

I think I spent two months there during 2002 or 2003. My contract was with UNDP in Dushanbe for a total of six months over three years with provision for my being present for two months in each successive year. I suppose I could have gone back during the successive years but I decided not to. The reason against my return was simple. It was my considered

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opinion that neither the Swedish supported UNDP group nor the project implementers were at all interested in providing the support and training to the impoverished migrating populations for which the project was designed. I suppose after the positive experiences I have had working with the UN in Pakistan I became disillusioned with the laid-back self-centred elitist regimen I encountered and I still adhere to my decision. I suppose however it has to be taken in context of what was a former Soviet society.

At a presentation on the progress of the project after three months I was left in no doubt that whatever were the original terms of reference for the project they did not have official backing other than as a means of ensuring finance was available. In contrast to this cosy set of agreements between UNDP, it's Swedish management and the local authorities I was impressed by the principled approaches being put in place separate to the UNDP/SIDA project by both the European Commission and the Aga Khan Foundation. Both of these organisations were making a substantive contribution towards developing new skills and promoting democratic approaches and solutions.

Driving through the high mountains with Afghanistan just over the hill.

Another technical shortcoming of the project was the scarcity of the training facilities provided. Over three month courses it was only possible to train around 100 migrants in Dushanbe and about the same when the facilities were available in the more remote facility at Gharm. In contrast to the need to bring forward proposals for maximising the utilisation of the facilities available there was little appreciation of what would have been required to increase throughput numbers. Sadly, but the personnel in the UNDP and the people charged with implementing the project were very much in favour of extending the period of training which would result in further reducing numbers availing of whatever was on offer. Indeed my friend the director for the project was anxious to change the project terms of reference to ensure that these facilities would be only available to the elite groups drawn mainly from Dushanbe. When the realisation dawned on me that rather than helping the poorest of the poor the financing being made available would be for the designated few from the elite groups of the country I confess I lost further interest.
Living experiences
Personally, I strongly felt the sense of being apart and separate during my stay in Dushanbe. I suppose it was the first time I had been in a country or a community where I had absolutely no knowledge of either the Tajik or Russian languages; the main languages in use. I lived alone in a European type apartment block which was probably designed by the prisoners of war. The principal difference I noticed was that there was no storm water drainage. The rainwater just cascaded vertically through the down pipes and was deposited with a whoosh on the public footpath below. When it rained you kept a weather eye out for such surprises!

Dushanbe as already noted was laid out in the classical style – at least the centre was. Walking up the main street to the Parliament Building and while impressive in architectural style - it was completely dominated by a snow-capped mountain - which towered above it with huge visual impact.

![Tajikistan: Traditional goat polo high up in the Rasdh Valley where a headless goat is used instead of a polo ball. This tradition is very old and is said to be descended from the Golden Horde.](image)

Both the Tajiks and Russians I met were extremely friendly. Usually we tried and with the help of a vodka or two we managed fairly well but surprisingly to bridge the language gap. Once when I was with a group of Tajiks the question of their language arose. Tajik is very closely related to the Persian Farsi language. So, I did my best and recited in English some couplets I knew from the Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam. The response was electric. I was celebrated. I was toasted. My friends began to recite in Farsi the whole Rubaiyat in extenso – each encouraging the other. It must have continued for nearly an hour as each of them competed with each other. I with my English-language limitation was forgotten. It really did help me to gain some acceptance in the group. If I knew of some of the works of their national poet – well, I couldn't be all bad. They had some unusual systems in the hotel where
I stayed for the first few days. Although it appeared to be the one hotel there were two quite separate bills: one was for the bed and one for the breakfast. Sometimes there was food and sometimes one went without. Eventually my UNDP minder, a huge Tajik, organised that I moved into an apartment block quite close to the centre of the city.

I liked living in what was reminiscent of an Austrian or German apartment block. People could be heard around me. I was near shops. It gave me something to do when I wasn't working. It certainly was lonely. My only contact with whom I could express myself in English was the secretary translator working on the project. She was a very pleasant person. She was a widow and an ex-NKVD official herself. Her husband had died in the Civil War a few years earlier.

The Civil War was between fundamentalist Moslems and the secular civil authorities left over from the earlier Soviet administration. The secularists, heavily supported from Moscow, were victorious. The Russians still have about a five thousand soldier garrison based in Dushanbe. The impression given was that there was an agreement with the United States that as Tajikistan was in the Soviet sphere of influence the Russians would provide whatever military defences were required to stifle any possibility of a Taleban insurgency from across the border in Afghanistan.

Tajikistan up until the fall of the Soviet Union had enjoyed good relations with Moscow. On the fall of the Soviet Union some 50% of the national budget which was normally received from Moscow was suspended. This as you might imagine has had huge repercussions for the life of most of the Tajik population. Under Russian Soviet rule women had a much better system. Many of them were encouraged to study and a number became PhDs. Since the withdrawal of Soviet assistance and support the life for women has reverted and now more resembles a woman's role under a traditional Moslem culture. There are no longer the same equal opportunities for advancement. Here in the West we condemn the Soviet regime for so many abuses but at the same time we fail to give adequate recognition for the good things that were done - especially in the area of women's rights and women's equality.

There are several incidents that come to mind as I cast my mind back on my time there. Some were quite bizarre. Others were unusual to say the least. To come back to the apartment block, my apartment hall door faced directly across to the other apartment door. One evening I came home after work to be surprised by sounds of keening accompanied by shrieks and howls from the women present in the adjoining apartment. The husband had died during the day and the traditional three-day wake had commenced. As best I could I presented my sympathy and provided some funds as I saw everybody else do to the lady who sat beside a table collecting the money on the small landing outside my apartment. Over the three day period the men would gather on trestles in the yard below and talk and smoke and commiserate in a way that would be quite familiar anywhere.

The keening continued right through the night. With only a light partition between my apartment and theirs there wasn't much that I didn't hear. Eventually in desperation I turned to the best antidote available namely I bought a bottle of vodka and supped away at it until I fell asleep. Vodka is a national antidote in that part of the world. It was interesting that while the body was buried on the day of his death the keening continued for three days afterwards. All in all - it wasn’t so different from some funerals and wakes I have attended here in Ireland.
It was a strange environment to be working in. We almost always had our lunch in a traditional caravanserai adjacent to the training centre. Present would be the project director, a Russian nuclear physicist, the lady translator and myself. There would be a long table radiating out from a central artificial pond. The door and windows would have hanging curtains to give a sense of privacy. Maybe this was to disguise the fact that the waiters were running to and fro replenishing the vodka bottles and not only ours but everyone else’s as well. The director seemed to enjoy these much extended conversations. He always would say “You happy? - I very happy too!” I think that was about the extent of his English. I am fairly sure he had a roving eye and much of the time that roving eye was cast in the direction of the translator. I think she enjoyed it but only to a certain extent. Certainly she was gone home to her son by four in the evening - every evening.

Come and join the picnic – up in Gharm, Tajikistan

There was supposed to be another training centre established in the mountainous location called Gharm. This was a very isolated area which normally was cut off in the wintertime. It didn't really interest the director because he didn't have responsibility for it. That had been delegated to a third person. We went on planning trips three or four times to this area. We travelled by jeep over rough mountain tracks taking a few days at a time. My contribution was in trying to develop a plan of activities including completing the buildings, purchasing the equipment and training materials and organising a start-up date when the local people were available for training and prior to their departure for the Russian Federation.

Everyone seemed to think it was a good idea to have a plan. But no one had any intention of ever complying with that plan! It was like a later time in Suriname where we produced a roadmap of things to be done in order to start a series of education reforms. Then everyone agreed it was a great idea. But when the time came for action they accused us of betraying them. It's a funny old world!
Some of the places I visited were spectacular. I was taken out by a guide on a hike over the mountains. He had been training a pet goose. He used this goose as a decoy to attract its unsuspecting fellows which then he either snared or shot. That's him in the picture below.

In the city it was different. There was a public park. In the park there was a restaurant where I used to call fairly frequently to read a book and have lunch on weekends. I was always on my own on the weekends and it was a place where families came to have their lunches and I thought I was accepted and felt at ease. That is until one Sunday lunch time when I was surprised and left sadly disillusioned. I was eating my lunch with a glass of wine when a well-dressed lady, a Russian, with about an eight-year-old boy came and sat at my table. I had thought that either I or she had made a mistake. I thought it probably was me and that she had booked the table and was waiting for her husband or partner. I apologised in English and got up to go. She then began to berate me very loudly in Russian. I apologised profusely. The English-speaking manager of the restaurant came over to ask, I assumed, what was the noise about. I tried to explain to him that there must have been a mix-up in the booking of the table. He laughed, shrugged his shoulders and gave me a knowing look after which I departed as quickly as I could. I didn't need any more explanations. The next day when I mentioned it to my translator she confirmed that it wasn't unusual for that sort of thing to happen, especially in the case of a lone male Westerner.

I found the bureaucracy very, very exasperating. Permissions were always required. So were travel authorisations - even for a very small journey. On the day that I left to take off for Istanbul I was allocated a UN official to deal with the local police and expedite what I was assured would be a quick departure through the airport. It's my recollection that it took five hours and I don't know how many inspections in order to have my visa stamped and my bags checked and re-checked. At the door just before we were allowed to go on the plane I was checked again. I am glad the guard didn't speak English because I used some very explicit English words to describe him and his bureaucracy. That was very foolish. Had the guard understood English I could have found myself in deep trouble.
Ironically, the project director and the translator continue to be close to each other. I have had several messages or emails from them both in connection with the possibility of future projects; either World Bank or EC funded. I like to think of them as friends from very different cultural backgrounds who like me - in a Russian sort of way. I hope they like me as a friend who enjoyed the courtesy of their company. I have no doubt they see me as a potentially useful contact with the Western funding agencies and want to make sure that in the case of any hand-outs they won't be forgotten. All things being equal I wouldn't forget them.

Other than the conviviality assisted with copious draughts of vodka and a party held at the drop of a hat - there is one other impression I have from that mission. I think those Tupolov Russian aeroplanes look very slender and very fast – from the outside. Inside the seating was quite uncomfortable given the narrow fuselage and the enormous size of my fellow travellers and their belongings.
High up in the Kingdom of Nepal

I'm sometimes questioned as to what is the most interesting country I have been privileged to visit or to work in. Certainly India, Vietnam, and Cambodia are all up there as major contenders. Another favourite is Bali. Bali superficially, because I don't know it well enough, but with its rich Hindu/Buddhist inheritance and natural beauty it has to be another favourite. But on some reflection - I think the country I would most like to visit and where I made most friends with the local people - was Nepal.

I would like very much more time to elaborate on my impressions of this wonderful country and its people which so stretch the imagination with its enormous wealth of religious culture, diversity, architecture - and especially the friendliness of the people. The old cities of Patan and Bhaktapur in the Kathmandu Valley - with their traditional Nawari architecture - were wonderful to visit. Maybe I'll have another opportunity to visit Nepal - perhaps on holiday and to visit and to note much more. Another time and with time available I'll try to ensure I see more of the stupendous mountain scenery.
It is extremely difficult to capture in a short essay the range of colour and the richness of culture and tradition and the friendliness of the people that one encounters all over Nepal. This is a deeply religious country. One feature we consultants appreciate very much, especially because it is so novel, is this religious disposition. It is responsible for the huge number of religious festivities taking place all over the country. I think it was during the period from September to November when religious celebrations accounted for maybe half the number of working days and when no work was done. It may have had its restrictions but the spectacle and excitement and colour and the novelty of it all - will always remain in my memory.

I think I first went to Nepal about 1996. I went with an EC colleague and we worked closely with our local Nepalese colleague Mohangopal. We continued missions there regularly up to the end of the year two thousand. My last mission was in 2005. Our initial involvement was with the multi- donor Basic and Primary Education Programme II. During that period we worked with representatives from the World Bank, the Asian Development Bank, NORAD, the Norwegian development agency and with DANIDA, the Danish development agency. We were there during the beginning of the political division of the country between the old traditional parties in the Congress and the emerging political power of the Maoist Peoples Party. During that first phase it wasn't a shooting war yet. Kathmandu and the major towns and cities were firmly under the control of the King and the parties close to the King. It is worth pointing out that the King was then seen by many of the deeply religious in his traditional role as the earthly manifestation of the Hindu god Shiva.

A little historical background

Nepal has had a long history of interaction with Moghul India and then subsequently with the British Raj. During the Raj it was isolated and kept separate. The British had a Representative there. Once the Russians were kept out and the King or the Rana nobility provided the British armies with a supply of soldiers - that for the British was deemed to be sufficient. Traditionally, the clans of Nepal fought with the Moghuls across the border in India. Over time the discipline and valour of the Ghurkha troops was recognised not only by the Moguls but also by the British who succeeded them. British armies in conflict with the Ghurkhas were apt to receive some bloody noses.

A solution was reached between the British and the King of the Ghurkhas. Young Ghurkhas of soldiering age were encouraged to enlist in the British armies of India. There were financial incentives for the King and the nobility to arrange this. On the other hand there was income to be gained by the young men and at the same time their departure from the Nepal guaranteed some peace with the most volatile elements of society away on foreign military service. Those who returned came with a British army pension and contributed to building up the society. Thus was Nepal governed and its economy supported.

The Rana nobility saw itself as being of equal status to the King of Nepal. Sometime during the nineteenth century they took the King hostage and ruled Nepal for more than a century under their own very peculiar system. To cover themselves they made a point of cozying up to the authorities in British India. They had not much time for education - certainly not for educating the lower castes. The British established a school for the nobility in Kathmandu towards the end of the 19th century but there was no organised schooling for the rest of the population until comparatively recently.
Even more interesting was the tradition of hereditary prime ministership, which continued again until relatively recently, or until the king escaped to India shortly after partition in 1947. Up until that time the king and his descendants had been held hostage for several generations. These Rana nobles were gamblers and generally highly irresponsible, if colourful. The book ‘a Tiger for Breakfast’ which I have somewhere was written about some of the goings-on in Nepal during the 19th and early 20th centuries.

It is only very recently that Nepal was governed in anything that came close to democratic rule. It is generally agreed that the watershed for transition to democratic rule occurred around 1990. Even still, this was only a partial sharing of power with the people. The king played a central hereditary role and continued to do so until last year - in 2008 - when he was deposed as a main condition of the peace treaty negotiated between the political parties and the Maoist army. The government parties in power were supportive of the king. Certainly from what I could see of their carry on they paid small attention to the needs of the poor which were and continue to be substantial.

These Rana nobles travelled to France in the nineteenth century and greatly admired the palaces of the nobility they found there. So taken with them that they brought over French architects and the centre of Kathmandu now plays host to a number of impressive nineteenth century palaces. Some are being utilised as hotels, such as the Yak and Yeti (the Himalayan cow and the Abominable Snowman) and a most prestigious establishment where the World Bank has its offices, or government buildings such as the Kashir Mehal, the headquarters of the Ministry of Education and Culture. They are truly marvellous places. You register them with great surprise as they seem to be so out of context with their surroundings. The palaces of the recently deposed king in contrast are much less impressive. So the nobles enjoyed their time between palace building and a hereditary prime ministership.
Some cultural aspects

The country is divided into somewhere between 20 and 40 different linguistic communities, each speaking their own separate language. These communities are divided by insurmountable mountainous passes which are a feature of the Himalayan range; the highest mountains in the world.

As noted already the country is rich in traditional Hindu religious customs. For example, we noted our local colleague would always have his head shaved following the anniversary of the death of his father. In doing this he was proud to continue the age-old traditions of his caste and country.

Durbar Markt in Kathmandu Centre with the traditional Nawari structure towards evening.

One of the social malaises, probably the principal one regarding education, is the continuing existence of the untouchable class, the Dalits. Children from this class were not accepted into the normal state-run schools. Neither were they allowed to eat or drink water in the presence of children of the recognised castes. Indeed, a considerable emphasis in the implementation of education reforms under the foreign donor supported Basic and Primary Education Programme was aimed at the amelioration of this awful and grossly inequitable situation.

Then again there is a huge poverty across the country. Traditionally, several brothers often would share one wife. This unusual situation is called polyandry and I’ve only heard of it in relation to Nepal. This was made possible by the absence perhaps of one or more of the husbands to serve long-term in the Ghurkha Army either in the United Kingdom or in India. Another feature of great poverty was the trafficking of children, especially girls, across the border to work in brothels in India in places like Calcutta or Mumbai. There would come a time when these girls were no longer income generating through abuse and they would be let go, destitute, to find their way back into their traditional communities in Nepal.
These practices happened, it was happening while we were in Nepal, and appear to be tolerated to some degree by the men who appear to be dominant under Hinduism. This male dominance in society continues to pose a question for me, namely, whether it has always been a feature of society and social usage in the general Indian subcontinent or whether it was brought to it through the expansion of incoming peoples from Central Asia or through Moslem social norms. It is my considered opinion that this male dominance and control has always been a feature of India as it has been throughout South-East Asia. Education will change it but it will take time and some formidable resistances can be expected.

On one occasion we were invited as a mission with the European Commission representative to a Nepalese house. The representative, a German, was married to a Nepalese lady of a lower caste. The team members including myself took our place without a thought at the high table beside the host and hostess. The host incidentally was a retired army general. In contrast, the German and his wife took up position at a lower table. They stayed there until they were invited with great courtesy to join the top table.

That same evening I remember we were offered what we took to be a non-alcoholic drink with which we were told had been prepared by an elderly relation of the family who was present. The refreshment was served in small silver cups from an elegant silver teapot. When the party was over I found myself to be more than a little tipsy from the liquor – as we belatedly found it to be. Both my colleagues were in even worse shape and required some help to negotiate the stairs.

**Education in Nepal**

Nepal's primary education officially is recognised to suffer from several constraints such as inadequate access and low participation, a low retention of students in the schools, a low
level of educational quality, inequalities in relation to various regions and social groups, inadequate financing, and limited management capacity and inadequate institutional support. I suppose this says it all.

Nepal was one of the poorest countries in the world at that time with a per capita annual income of US $220 and very low social indicators. 42% of the population lived below the official poverty line. According to the 1991 Census, the overall literacy rate for the population of 6 years and above was 40%, with a female literacy rate of 25%. There exist wide inter-district and regional variations in literacy rates. Literacy among the ethnic minorities and rural populations is alarmingly low. Ethnic and linguistic groups have always experienced differentiated access to quality educational services. This situation created differential educational outcomes especially among females from linguistic minorities, Dalits and other socially deprived groups.

In response to this somewhat dismal situation the expansion of schooling was recognised by the donors and by some of the ruling classes as constituting one of the most effective long term means of raising levels of economic and social development. The objective of donor support was to strengthen the human resource base of the country so as to alleviate poverty. A major element of the donor support design had been the decision to support recent legislative reforms and to reform the civil service and the building of a decentralised institutional framework together with strategies to strengthen the Ministry of Education, both at the district level as well as at the school community levels.

Overall, implementation of the project we worked on has to be seen against the background of the then ongoing Maoist insurgency, which by then had cost over 11,000 fatalities in a country of about six million. It may be interesting for the reader to reflect on what happens to an educational system and the teachers and children who were affected by armed insurrection during the extended course of the Nepalese conflict. The following are extracts drawn from the final evaluation of the Basic and Primary Education Programme II which was completed sometime in 2005.

"The insurgency has had a profound effect on the delivery of essential services in many parts of the country. Violence has intensified in the eight years of conflict. National bandhs (strikes/closures) have resulted in widespread disorder, people have migrated away from affected areas, and state officials have been unable to function any appreciable distance beyond district headquarters in some areas of the country.

The education sector has been explicitly targeted with attacks on educational facilities, school strikes, disruptions to daily schooling practices, and the abduction of teachers and students.\(^4\)

The intensity and extent of the ‘People’s War’ launched in 1996 by the Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist) has significantly increased since 2001, when the (national) army was directly drawn into the conflict. Over the course of the eight years of the insurgency, the violence has intensified and the geographical spread of the conflict has extended. Now almost all districts of the country are affected by the conflict to varying degrees.

It is difficult to determine with any accuracy how many school age children have been denied access to schooling in areas especially affected by the insurgency. The apparent influx of

\(^{4}\) Sadly as I also noted from a study of the worst forms of child labour it is always the children who suffer most in these conflicts.
children to relatively secure areas (and consequent overcrowding in schools in or near district capitals as observed in the district case studies) suggests that the insurgency has had a significant, negative impact on access. Development activities in many of the most affected areas have been severely constrained or halted. Most development organisations are unable to operate in the rural areas under Maoist control and have pulled back to district headquarters or to Kathmandu.

A women’s literacy class in full swing in an isolated area we visited.

Teachers in many areas are ‘caught in the middle’ between the security forces and the Maoists - and are fearful of being targeted or victimised by both sides. Teachers’ Associations estimate that over 150 teachers have been killed during the conflict and many hundreds more are no longer in post - whether as a result of forced migration or as a result of abduction. Teachers throughout the country are being forced to make ‘donations’ to the Maoists, further adding to the climate of fear.

Without systematic data, it is difficult to know the exact impact of the conflict on children. What is clear is that the Maoists have targeted older students (grades 8-10) as potential supporters. There is evidence that students – even in younger classes – have not attended school for extended periods of time due to fears of being kidnapped on the way to or from their classrooms. The psychological impact of the conflict on children has not been investigated.”

My comment on the foregoing official analysis would be that it’s not all bad. In contrast to be apparent lack of interest in education reform evidenced by the ministerial clique living centrally in the security and luxury of the Kathmandu Valley a visit to the communities living outside the valley was quite instructive. There non-government organisations and community-based organisations were busy promoting education and the education was inclusive including both the lower caste children as well as the children of the recognised castes and wealthier populations.

There was evidence of commitment and enthusiasm. The picture above is of literacy classes being provided to lower-caste mothers by the local NGO in a Maoist area. In the absence of
good governance from the centre and support for education I suppose it is legitimate to assume that there would be politicisation of the system with very close linkages between the NGOs and the Maoist politicians who were seeking to bring education to all and to improve conditions generally for the rural poor.

A stroll through Kathmandu
Usually as a team we would stay in the Shangri-La Hotel to the north of the city in the direction of the airport. Coming out of the hotel you turn right and walk along a busy footpath past shops with silks and all sorts of exotic cloths and hats – just before you reach the old, old palace of the former king you pass the headquarters of the Ministry of Education Youth and Culture. This was originally built as a Rana Palace. I have been there so often, have attended meetings, and have been interviewed by the administration and the Minister in the finely decorated reception rooms.

Then we leave the Ministry - dodging the bird droppings along the pathway and turn right - and soon we begin to enter the old city in the area called Tamil.

Tamil is the old centre of Kathmandu. I have been through it passing the tall buildings with their golden doors and shop windows and enjoying the spectre of such an attractive, unusual, old but always engaging environment. I see in my mind’s eye the old brick walls, the heavy sculptured doors wide open and from the inside a huge array of objects many or most of which would have been thrown away in our throwaway western culture, or fruits, or cases of teas or spices in sacks piled high on top of each other. Around every corner there is a new perspective; one different from the other an overall there is a huge sense of history.

This is the tourist area and we are traversing it to reach the old Durbar Square at the far side of Tamil. Along the way there are shops with all kinds of mountain trekking gear; anoraks, trousers, mountain boots, hats – and all at such cheap prices. I must have bought myself and our two boys a range of mountain clothing in these shops.

Further on past the restaurants I look left and I see a sign with ‘Irish Pub’ written on it. Some years ago I was introduced to the Irish girl who was the proprietor. She was from Tipperary and had met the love of her life during a holiday trip to Kathmandu. Now she was married and they had a child. But business had not been so good and so she was considering returning with her husband to live in Ireland. What the change must mean for him! What the changes to live in Nepal had been for her! It was lovely to meet them and to offer to bring back to Ireland some package for her parents.

Recently, I found it sad to hear an Irish language poet boasting of his homosexual encounters with young men in bars in this area. The Nepalese youth I found to be gentle and trusting of foreigners. I hate to think of them being preyed upon by any dubious predators coming from my country.
Continuing on, I pass the Pilgrim Bookshop where I have spent many happy hours drinking coffee or beer and fingerling the wonderful books and catalogues that are available. I continue on – aiming to find the simple old restaurant where I have had many, many, sizzling steaks along with glasses of local Kathmandu whiskey! On so many occasions traversing through the north Tamil area I’ve been enthralled by the always open bars, the old buildings, the tables set in restaurants, bookshops, clothing shops and all beckoning for my attention. At the far end were the tailor shops. First in one shop you bought the material. I remember buying material for a suit which was marked ‘excellent English wool’. Then I brought to the shop a pair of comfortable trousers and a blazer. These were used by the tailor as models. Two days later I returned to collect one of my favourite suits which I may still have hanging somewhere in my wardrobe.

I think I mentioned earlier I worked as part of a European Commission team of experts which in itself was part of a broader government/donor community team. I very much appreciated the opportunity of working with such a wide range of Nepalese, South Asian, European and American consultants. This team was normally split between management and technical experts, the latter involved in a whole range of issues relating to school quality and attendance. But within these teams it was not unusual for some heat and tension to be generated. On one occasion there was considerable resentment by the technical team members that they should be required to make visits into the bush while the management team remained in the cosy ambience of the Kathmandu Valley. I was amongst the latter management team – but for my part I would much have preferred to be out exploring across the countryside.

There was an Indian lady representing the EC Delegation in Delhi. Occasionally there was the lady whom we called the “Little Princess” who came with us from Brussels. As a group we worked together with the full team of World Bank experts, representatives from the Asian Development Bank, from UNICEF, the Danish aid mission DANIDA and the Norwegians. Coming together on a number of missions as might be expected we developed a great deal of cross friendships. The lady colleagues in particular were very enthusiastic on insisting that a
certain stages we would socialise together in a nightclub called the Underground Bar. It became apparent that the ladies escorted by the more elderly gents would enjoy dancing until they were imposed upon by the local young Nepalese men. The ladies didn't always appreciate the fairly heavy-handed advances made on their persons by the latter. After maybe two hours we would withdraw in a group and have a meal together in some of the beautiful but simple restaurants of Kathmandu. It was altogether a spectacular and always very enjoyable experience.

The team visiting a class of deaf-mute boys and their teacher in the countryside outside the Kathmandu Valley.

It will be interesting to see the changes which will arise from the dismissal of the traditional Hindu king and his replacement with an elected government with substantial left-wing Maoist representation. In my experience, up to 2005 anyway, there has been a huge emphasis on religious and cultural traditions across Nepal. One particular example relates to the Kathmandu valley itself. Traditionally, the Nawari clan ruled the Kathmandu Valley. They were the great architects and constructors of their time. It was the Nawari architectural concepts that transferred from Nepal and travelled across China and extended even to Japan. But some three hundred years ago the Nawari dynasty was overthrown by the Ghurkha kings, who came from outside the valley. I was assured by members of the Nawari clan that there was no intermarriage between the two groups. They have lived parallel lives for centuries without any social interaction.

Returning to the mission there often were tensions between the teams representing the various donor agencies. Once there was a particularly strong confrontation with the World Bank over what we considered was the disproportionate investment they proposed to make in school buildings. Construction is always the opportunity for corruption. I was aware that the World Bank knew that the government and regional officials would very much welcome a substantial investment. The other donors combined and faced down the World Bank on that occasion. I think a split of seventy five per cent for education quality and management and twenty-five per cent for construction was agreed. It didn’t make for friendly relations between the EC and World Bank teams.
The older team leaders had a way of patronising the opposition. On one occasion the World Bank team was led by small plump but very capable Dutchman. In contrast his DANIDA, Danish counterpart, was the tallest man I have ever known. He must have been two and a half metres tall. I suppose the different physical attributes paid a part in contributing to the continuous barrage of criticism which took place between them. To our mind each of them acted like a prima ballerina. The rest of us became very embarrassed to see this carry-on take place in front of our Nepalese counterparts and hosts. On one occasion we all decided to face up to them. I invited them to a drinks party in my bedroom. While there the Dutch colleagues confronted their countryman. I had a go at the Dane. I felt so small as I put my shoulders back and looked up and criticised him. I knew what it must have been like to be David against Goliath!

There was peace for a while. Then one morning as I led my team consisting of myself and three ladies and colleagues from the Delegation in India into the meeting room the Dutch man greeted us with “Ahh….. Here comes Liam and his lovely ladies.” I was very much amused by the reception. The ladies were not and made it very clear that they were not. I heard them whispering to each other – highly critical – and in no way flattering remarks. It was a long time before they forgave him.

Another time and it was the man from World Bank’s turn. The teams were seated on a Dias around a large table. It was a formal meeting and each of the team leaders was presenting his or her findings on different aspects of the project to the Minister and his colleagues. The meeting seemed to go on for hours. Anyway while I was still dozing off the World Bank man concluded his presentation saying something like it was his task to outline the broad principles and he would leave it to his EC colleague, Mr Owens, to fill in the details. I had my three ladies sitting behind me. I awoke with searing pain caused by something like a stiletto shoe going deep into my shin with the sharp end.

I was lucky. I had prepared what I was going to say. I began well and taking confidence from a good start went on to make what seems to have been an acceptable presentation. Afterwards, I was resentful of the situation which the World Bank fellow had tried to place me in. But anyway he was a cold fish and not popular with the group as a whole. I developed a further strengthened reputation for “rent a speech” after that incident.
I’m reminded of Yeat’s “public man” as I visit a local school.

Not far from Kathmandu outside the valley and down towards the Tirai and Bihar in India is Lumbini, the birthplace of the Buddha. This is a most important religious pilgrimage centre. Each of the Buddhist countries worldwide including representatives of important Buddhist communities in the West erect their national pavilions to facilitate their pilgrims. These pavilions formed a riot of colour. Each of them sported their exotic national tapestries, furnitures and carvings. With so many pilgrims from a variety of nationalities there was a special buzz about the place.

On the way back to Kathmandu we crossed a gorge. Thirty metres below the river ran. We were in the bright red Mercedes taxi that we always hired as transport. As usual, we had warned the driver that if he didn’t slow down we’d find someone else. He never slowed down for long. But even he was shocked when the truck immediately ahead of us turned over and fell down into the river killing the driver and his passenger immediately. We looked down on the fast flowing oily slick and the bubbles – and that was all. There was nothing we could do. We drove back very much chastened by the experience.

During one of our early missions we were able to go out into the field to visit schools. It was such a pleasure to be welcomed into the area and to meet children and their teachers and to see how even with the most basic of materials there was teaching and there was a learning process in place. There was one school where I was introduced to the assembled teachers and school children. I asked my few questions and made some congratulatory comments about the school and how it has managed. Afterwards, I was asked to sign the visitors’ book and to write some comments which would be shown to inspectors and other ministry dignitaries when they visited. In the humidity and the sweltering heat someone took a photograph of me writing my comments in the book while behind me I was fanned by a kind old gentleman.
On one mission into the field in Chitwan District we overnighted in a village very close to Tiger Tops, the very well-known national park of Nepal. The weather was mild and warm and we decided that each of us would hire an elephant and spend an hour or so as tourists on elephant back viewing the fauna and flora of the locality, especially the former. We had been advised to expect to see sightings of the very scarce white rhinoceros. If we were lucky we might see a tiger and of course there would be a variety of deer to be seen.

Whatever about the tiger we did see two young white rhinoceros and some deer. So accustomed were they to the presence of the elephants and the tourists that they allowed us to come very close to them and they would just continue on browsing. The pictures above and below are souvenirs of that happy dalliance.

In February 2005 I had been working with my Nepali friend and colleague on a new project for EC funding to succeed the Basic and Primary Education Project (BPEP). The mission started off in the EC Delegation in Delhi where we were briefed on the expected results. As usual we worked together very well although the political background in Nepal was quite ominous. There were rumours everywhere that the king was intending to impose martial law and to launch a coup with the support of the Nepalese army.

The previous evening I had been invited by my friend to meet his family and to share dinner with them. Before the meal each of his three daughters took a turn to read extracts from the sacred Bhagavad-Gita, the Hindu religious text. His wife served us but didn’t join us at the table. I still can see how proud she was of her husband and her daughters. It was a lovely experience.
The next day being Friday and therefore a holiday started off well. I accompanied my friend to a farm where some of his friends, several of whom were also consultants, bred as a hobby different types of exotic orchids. We sat back on easy chairs in the sunlight and together we mixed business and conversation. The father figure, the head of the family showed me around the gardens and in the distance I could see the high white snow-capped Himalayas with Mount Everest somewhere amongst them. It was a perfect sunny day. We chatted away at our ease while the children ran around and the ladies conversed together in Nepali. We had some large glasses of local whiskey which only added to a most pleasant atmosphere.

About three in the afternoon I thanked my hosts profusely and took a taxi back to my hotel. There was one short cryptic emailed note from my brother back in Dublin that my sister had died in her sleep. I was stunned. It is what travelling consultants fear the most that they could be away on mission on such occasions. I felt so miserable and so lonely and so far away from home and all whom I loved. I wouldn’t wish that experience on anyone.

I realised it being Friday that there was no way I could contact my friend until the next day, Saturday, to arrange a flight home. I knew it would be difficult as the king had put the city under martial law a day or two before. The next day and very much due to the good offices of my local friends and some expenditure of baksheesh I managed to organise a seat on a plane to Europe.

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5 Subsequently on missions to Bangladesh I met many of these friends stationed there.
I’m proud of this close-up shot of the white rhinoceros taken from elephant back.

Before I left Kathmandu in the early morning darkness I have vivid memories of being stopped and checked by a military patrol and at several checkpoints. That was my last experience of Nepal and both an unusual and untypical one. I prefer to think of the Nepali as a kind, friendly, welcoming and dignified people with an amazingly colourful history and culture.
Far Eastern sketches of post-conflict Cambodia and Vietnam

Ironically experience has led me to consider Cambodia and its traditional arch enemy Vietnam as two of my favourite countries. There’s certainly a magic about Cambodia that casts an enduring spell on many who visit this charming yet paradoxical kingdom. On the one hand there is the history, majesty and artistic pre-eminence of the mother of all temples, Angkor Wat and on the other there are the horrors which were self-inflicted by the Khmer Rouge and its killing machine. On the ground it was extremely difficult for me to contrast this gentle and patient but impoverished people with the horrible events of twenty five years ago. Certainly there are several Cambodias. Looking back I identify a friendliness and hospitality in personal relationships. I then try to reconcile these positive feelings with the corruption that exists at the political level and then to an understanding of what led these same gentle Khmer people to perpetrate the massacres of the recent past.

The Angkor Wat Temple has become a symbol of Cambodia, and is a source of great national pride. I understand that a depiction of Angkor Wat has been a part of Cambodian national flags since the introduction of the first version circa 1863.

Cambodia is the successor state of the once powerful Hindu and Buddhist Khmer Empire, which ruled most of the Indochinese Peninsula between the 11th and 14th centuries. With a land area of 69,898 square miles it’s about twice the area of Ireland. The kingdom's capital and largest city is Phnom Penh. The country borders Thailand to its west and northwest, Laos to its northeast and Vietnam to its east and southeast. In the south it faces the Gulf of Thailand. The geography of Cambodia is dominated by the Mekong River (colloquial Khmer: Tonle Thom or "the great river") and the Tonlé Sap ("the fresh water lake"), an important source of fish and earlier the powerbase supporting the Khmer empire.

The Khmer Empire declined as the regional power but yet remained an influential broker in the region until the 15th century. The empire's centre of power was Angkor, where a series of capitals were constructed during the empire's zenith. It is estimated by experts that Angkor could have supported a population of up to one million people. It was the world's largest pre-
After a long series of wars with neighbouring kingdoms, Angkor was sacked by the Thais and abandoned in 1432 because of ecological failure and infrastructure breakdown. Afterwards the buildings were swallowed up by jungle creating a myth of a hidden lost civilization. The court moved the capital to Lovek where the kingdom sought to regain its glory through maritime trade. During the next three centuries the Khmer kingdom alternated as a vassal state of the Thai and Vietnamese kings, with short-lived periods of relative independence in between. Responding to continuing pressure from his neighbours the Khmer king placed the country under French protection in 1863 and it became part of French Indochina in 1887. Following Japanese occupation in World War II, Cambodia gained full independence from France in 1953.

Between 1969 and 1973 the country was caught up in a series of horrible wars. U.S. forces bombed and briefly invaded Cambodia in an effort to disrupt the Viet Cong and Khmer Rouge. Some two million Cambodians were made refugees by the war and fled to Phnom Penh. Estimates of the number of Cambodians killed during the bombing campaigns vary widely, as do views of the effects of the bombing. The US Seventh Air Force ruthlessly argued that the bombing prevented the fall of Phnom Penh in 1973 by killing 16,000 of 25,500 Khmer Rouge fighters besieging the city. As the war ended, a draft USAID report observed that the country faced famine in 1975, with 75% of its draft animals destroyed and
that rice planting for the next harvest would have to be done "by the hard labour of seriously malnourished people".

Then terrible calamity struck. The Khmer Rouge reached Phnom Penh and took power in 1975. The regime, led by Pol Pot, changed the official name of the country to Democratic Kampuchea. It was backed by China and heavily influenced by the Cultural Revolution there. The Khmer Rouge immediately evacuated the cities and sent the entire population on forced marches to rural work projects. They attempted to rebuild the country's agriculture on the model of the 11th century; discarded Western medicine and destroyed temples, libraries and anything considered Western.

Thus and like the radical exponents of the Cultural Revolution during the 1960s they regarded traditional education with unalloyed hostility. After the fall of Phnom Penh they executed thousands of teachers. Those who had been educators only managed to survive by hiding their identities. A local consultant on our first mission was lucky to have escaped because he wasn't immediately returned to his local village and because of the skills with oxen he could demonstrate to his guards. For a regime at war with most of Cambodia's traditional values this meant that it was necessary to create a gap between the values of the young and the values of the non-revolutionary old. Having lost parents, siblings, and friends in the war and lacking the Buddhist values of their elders, the Khmer Rouge youth were said to have lacked any inhibitions that might have dampened their zeal for revolutionary terror.

Estimates as to how many people were killed by the Khmer Rouge regime range from approximately one to three million. This era gave rise to the term Killing Fields, and the prison Tuol Sleng in Phnom Penh became notorious for its history of mass killing. The Cham
Muslims suffered serious purges with as much as half of their population exterminated. The professions, such as doctors, lawyers, and teachers, were targeted. Eyeglasses were deadly as they were seen as a sign of intellectualism.

A December 1978 Vietnamese invasion drove the Khmer Rouge into the countryside. It began a 10-year Vietnamese occupation and touched off almost 13 years of civil war. The 1991 Paris Peace Accords mandated democratic elections and a ceasefire, which was not fully respected by the Khmer Rouge. The remaining elements of the Khmer Rouge surrendered only in early 1999.

UNICEF has designated Cambodia the third most land mined country in the world, attributing over 60,000 civilian deaths and thousands more maimed or injured since 1970 to the unexploded land mines left behind in rural areas. The majority of the victims are children herding animals or playing in the fields. Adults that survive landmines often require amputation of one or more limbs and have to resort to begging for survival. In 2006, the number of landmine casualties in Cambodia took a sharp decrease of more than 50% compared to 2005, with the number of landmine victims down from 800 in 2005 to less than 400 in 2006.

While a number of the members of the Royal family were executed during the Pol Pot regime, King Sihanouk, who died only recently continued to play a major role politically throughout this momentous period. From all accounts he was a shrewd and often devious and unscrupulous manipulator: playing one side against the other in the interests of the monarchy. He certainly was held in high esteem by the Chinese. He visited Beijing regularly for medical treatment, and probably mixed it with some politics. In October 2004, he abdicated the throne and his son, Prince Norodom Sihamoni, was selected by a special nine-member throne council, part of a selection process that was quickly put in place after the surprise abdication a week before. Sihamoni's selection was endorsed by Prime Minister Hun Sen and National Assembly Speaker Prince Norodom Ranariddh (another somewhat dubious character who is the king's half-brother and current chief advisor and earlier had instigated a national coup), both members of the throne council. He was crowned in Phnom Penh on October 29, 2004.

I was in Phnom Penh at the time, and the word was that his son had been selected by the government on the basis of his homosexuality and predilection for what were seen to be effete interests such as ballet and dance. It was supposed that without an heir there would be little embarrassment for the government should they choose to depose him.

Since the Vietnam War and especially the Khmer Rouge terror events there are several experienced observers of Cambodia who have tried to pinpoint how these awful things could have happened. There appears to be a degree of consensus as to the historical antipathy between the dominant elite resident in Phnom Penh the capital who imposed their will on the humble farming community with a degree of cruelty and insensitivity. I read an account of where the agent of one of these noble families had captured several protesting farmers. He chained them up. Then, he is said to have washed his hands and ate a hearty breakfast before he executed each of them in turn. So I suppose in the havoc wreaked by the Khmer Rouge on Phnom Penh there was some degree of exacting a kind of retribution for these earlier atrocities. Personally, I experienced several aspects of Cambodia – some but not all good. I certainly had no stomach for visiting sites such as the Killing Fields or the torture prison in Phnom Penh.
Flying in to Phnom Penh airport during the rainy season is to look down on huge tracts of land under water spreading from one horizon to the other. The country is very much at the mercy of the great Mekong River and its numerous tributaries. This flooding presents significant challenges not only for the farmers, but for all persons living in the countryside. In areas adjacent to the rivers they can be inundated to a level of up to three or four metres. On the rivers, people live in floating barges. Fishermen and their families live together, incredibly cramped in small boats.

For farmers living close to the rivers such as those in the house photographed below you will notice that the house is built on stilts. This is to ensure that when the floods come, all belongings and livestock are transferred to safety above the waters. I wondered how small children survive living above the dangerous flood waters.

These houses on stilts allow for flooding of the Mekong and its tributaries. The village is located on the road from Phnom Penh south to the Vietnamese border.

**Education background**

Cambodia is one of very few countries where the education system because of ideological motives, had been systematically destroyed. After the Pol Pot years there were only 300 out of 11 million Cambodians with a higher education left. UNICEF expects that of 1,000 Cambodians born today, 290 will never go to school, 390 will repeat the first grade, and 500 will not complete the primary education that they begin. Only 27 out of 1,000 Cambodians who enter primary school will graduate from high school.

Civil war and its aftermath have had a marked effect on the Cambodian population. The median age is 20.6 years, with more than 50% of the population younger than 25. At 0.95 male/female ratio, Cambodia has the most female-biased sex ratio in the Greater Mekong sub-region. In the Cambodian population over 65, the female to male ratio is 1.6:1. Mr. Henry Kamm, in his Pulitzer Prize winning analysis of recent Cambodian history⁶, has indicated the unique ground zero situation educationally- speaking to which the country had

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descended. Under the Pol Pot regime schools had been abolished and the teacher cadre eliminated. Currently half of the 47,000 primary school teachers have been recruited without even having completed their primary education of five or six years. The older population often lacks education, particularly in the countryside, which suffers from a lack of basic infrastructure. Fear of renewed political instability and corruption within the government discourages foreign investment and delays foreign aid, although there has been significant assistance from bilateral and multilateral donors.

Parents in common with all societies are not indifferent to the education of their children. Great hope lies in the fact that in one of the world’s poorest countries families are prepared to assume two thirds of the cost payable for maintaining a public school system; possibly the highest rate of such contributions in Asia. Teachers’ salaries are about twenty dollars a month. Such low salaries mean that all teachers hold second and third jobs. A widely used and tolerated practice especially in urban areas is for teachers to keep their classes beyond the regular hours. They call the extra time “private lessons” for which parents must pay. In rural areas, systems based on “gifts in kind” paid by parents can be found to operate. The sacrifice that this represents for the average family can be measured by the fact that the government teachers’ salaries represent the national average for regularly employed Cambodians. It’s very low. However poor they might be the parents pay for school repairs and building projects and offer gifts in kind to teachers.

Khmer culture, as developed and spread by the Khmer empire, has distinctive styles of dance, architecture and sculpture, which throughout history have been exchanged with neighbouring Laos and Thailand. Angkor Wat (Angkor means "city" and Wat "temple") is the best preserved example of Khmer architecture from the Angkorian era and hundreds of other temples have been discovered in and around the region. Traditionally, the Khmer people have a unique method of recording information on Tra leaf. Tra leaf books record information on legends of the Khmer people, the Ramayana, the origin of Buddhism and other prayer book series. They are greatly taken care of and wrapped in cloth to protect them from moisture and the jungle climate.

Later while in neighbouring Vietnam on an Identification Mission I travelled through some of the South West Vietnamese provinces adjacent to the Cambodian border. I noted so often how much the villages and schools resembled those I had seen earlier in Cambodia. I even remarked on it to my Vietnamese companions. I noticed they were not at all happy. Then it occurred to me that the Vietnamese not so long ago had wrested these Khmer speaking areas from Cambodia.

I have had three separate involvements with the country over the last eight or nine years prior to about 2006. The first was in 1999, when I was appointed team leader to make an evaluation of the first post-civil war education support initiative by the European Commission. The project, which commenced in September 1994, had had as its overall objective the strengthening of the primary education sector in Cambodia through reorganisation and re-qualification of Cambodian civil servants responsible for the functioning of schools in every province. With strong elements of an emergency project it was national in scale, ambitious and not always realistic in its objectives. It was managed on behalf of the EC by two former French paratroopers whom I esteemed highly. Both men worked in parallel; one was involved in reorganising the Ministry of Education and Sport from within. The other ran the project in the field. Things went well until perhaps inevitably after several years there was a falling out between the two.
Despite design weaknesses in project preparation the project had been successful and had made substantial impact. This impact has to be seen against the insecure political and social situation which affected the early stages. The project had made a substantive contribution towards developing and institutionalising professionalism and a range of good practices within the Ministry system. This in no small way has to be attributed to the creative and flexible management style displayed by the two French project managers and to the positive response provided by the Ministry. The reforms operated nation-wide and introduced a valuable degree of uniformity in the systems and training it delivered.

My mission team concluded that although the approaches adopted by the EC management experts were somewhat unorthodox it was their radical response to a very difficult post-conflict situation. From the government perspective we learned it had been considered a significant success. Management of the project had been successful in promoting the reforms nationally, instead of restricting them to individual regions or districts. I personally was taken aback when the Secretary of State characterised the situation following the surprise cut-off of any further EC aid without notice as a situation where ‘the EC had made the Ministry of Education pregnant with policies, targets and the means to achieve them. Having made the Ministry thus pregnant with good ideas the EC was now abandoning the government and the poor people of Cambodia to their own very limited devices’.

As an evaluation team we shared this outrage and frustration at the decision, which had been taken in Brussels and which we considered to be wrong, autocratic as well as without any consultation with the host government. I still think it to have been very, very poor practice. At the same time, I was intrigued at the opportunity given to me to use this very telling description namely that the EC having put the Ministry of Education ‘up the pole’ was now abandoning the baby! I am sure there are not many reports commissioned by the European Commission, which carry that sort of message. I understand there were reverberations back in headquarters in Brussels. Subsequently, when we advised the Secretary of State that we had quoted him directly in our evaluation report he went out of his way to express his
appreciation and approval. It helped to build up good relationships during my subsequent postings.

My second involvement was somewhat longer and commenced early in 2003 and lasted for six months when I was based in the Ministry in Phnom Penh. My job was to streamline a second package of EC targeted budget support of about €20 million focused on a limited number of the Ministry’s priority action programmes. Given the criticism with which we had earlier lambasted the EC for arbitrarily terminating its aid without notice to the government I had no idea that the EC would be prepared to appoint me as their liaison person inside the Ministry. That was what happened and between formulating a proposal and following up and monitoring the progress achieved I was involved altogether in eight to ten missions involving multi-donor teams for the next four to five years.

For the duration of the six-month posting I was to provide policy support and advice on targeted budget support to the Ministry. In practice, this meant that I reported directly to the Minister of Education who was Deputy Prime Minister and who represented the Cambodian monarchical party, while at the same time I reported to the Secretary of State mentioned above, who represented the majority populist party of Han Sen, the Prime Minister. The Deputy Prime Minister was a Cham, one of a minority Cambodian Moslem sect which as noted had suffered heavily under the Khmer Rouge. Both he and the Secretary of State in private audience with me shared some of the horrors they had experienced in being imprisoned by the Khmer Rouge. On one occasion, one of them was designated to execute a prisoner he knew well. He knew full well that were he not to do it - he himself would be executed. He has had to live with the memory ever since.

Both men would sit with me and another counterpart from the Asian Development Bank. Together with these men we spent many hours in policy, strategy and financial discussion. I learned to admire them and to respect them as committed parliamentarians and as excellent persons in their own right. I recognised that there was a shared admiration between them. But they were not in a position because of party allegiances to publicly express this admiration and support.

So, sitting with the Deputy Prime Minister the Asian Bank representative and I would discuss issues for hours and hours. The two of them would chain smoke like trains as we came up with alternative solutions to many issues of governance and finance. On one occasion the World Bank had submitted a letter to the Deputy Prime Minister, which was exceptionally patronising and which complained of the lack of adequate transparency and capacity within the Ministry. It was written by an Irish-Australian. I still see him in my mind's eye declaiming like a parish priest to a submissive flock and exuding a heavy confidence and a clerical zeal. I was designated to prepare a first draft of a reply. I went away and did my best and came back and tabled a balanced version, which I thought was to the point. I recall the Deputy Prime Minister's comment: “Not strong enough Liam – go away and make it stronger”. I did as I was told and pulled no punches the second time. He made some small changes and signed the letter.

There was huge upset and resentment expressed by the World Bank at the sentiments contained in the letter. It was a direct criticism of World Bank management coming from the top of the recipient government. I would like to think that World Bank would have mended its ways after that experience. Sadly, my knowledge of the track record of the World Bank in such circumstances was not always positive; not even over the medium term. But in this
instance, it did draw back. At the same time, it carried out a witch hunt to find out who had drafted the letter. The Bank and the other donors were well aware that it had to be one of the expatriates providing support to the Ministry. No one disclosed the author - although I was fingered on several occasions. About two years later at some social function long after I had departed from the Ministry and when the furore and heat was long over a lady from the Bank suggested I was the miscreant responsible. I smiled. I didn't deny it.

As part of my terms of reference from the EC I was to provide support and be a bridge between the Education Ministry and the Ministry of Finance. This was not at all as straightforward as it might appear and perhaps a short explanation would be useful.

Most countries, whether Western - or of whatever other political stripe - distinguish very clearly between the roles of the Finance Ministry, which collects the taxes, duties and other government income and the spending ministries such as an Education Ministry. My friends, the Deputy Prime Minister and the Secretary of State for education, saw the EC and the other major donors as natural allies for putting pressure on the Ministry of Finance to deliver funds in a timely and effective manner. This was so they could provide finance for the commitments they had given from the education budget for any given year. This is normally the perspective of an education Ministry. However, it is rarely shared by the Finance Ministry. It certainly wasn't in Cambodia and the Minister and his senior officials were tough people to deal with. I found out early that not alone was there a determined objection by the Finance Ministry to have any close dialogue or even contacts - above the absolute minimal - with the Education Ministry but at the top level in each Ministry there was a personal antipathy between the individual Ministers and Secretaries of State.

I quickly discovered that my major task was to improve relationships at the top. I think as a consultant you develop certain insights and approaches to situations like this that you don’t necessarily learn at College. From the start the EC was quite supportive and offered to host a meeting between the respective Ministers and Secretaries of State in the Delegation. It was my task to try to reach agreement on a time and date between the key officials and senior advisers. I made every effort to establish my credibility with the Ministry of Finance. It was hard going at times as they extracted their pound of flesh. Finance is always the senior Ministry with the best calibre of people at the top.

I personally undertook to draft specific official letters confirming in a delicate manner the Finance Ministry's reluctance to such a meeting and indicating a quid pro quo from the EC to provide some funds for the Finance Ministry were it to take place. I drafted as a sop to the Finance Ministry several very dignified letters full of financial jargon which were intended to put pressure and succeeded to a substantial degree in gaining concessions in several other funding areas. Strangely, the EC really believed the Finance Ministry had drafted these notes. I think I still have copies of them adorned with the Finance Ministry’s official notepaper.
Devatas are characteristic of the Angkor Wat style.

I recall vividly the arrival of the two Ministers and their senior advisers in the EC Delegation. There was a short and brittle exchange of courtesies. From that time on there was no eye contact between them. They both focused their attention directly on me and my EC official counterpart. It would have been laughable if it was not so serious. On the EC side we were extremely concerned that this breakdown in communications was having major adverse effects on girls and boys gaining access to education in the public schools.

After interminable discussions and ventilations as well as justifications and accusations with a break for morning coffee followed by a lunch we managed to make some headway in establishing, with the EC as observers, the creation of a Joint Education Funding Committee or some similar sounding title, which it was agreed would meet on a three monthly basis to sort out major difficulties identified by either Ministry. I am advised that this Committee continues to be in existence some several years after I finished in Cambodia. It was a very important learning experience for me and subsequently when I was on a mission in other countries I recalled it as a necessary first step towards for setting up good relations between the respective ministries.

Nearly all the countries had similar confrontational issues. As I noted earlier and much later in Egypt the then Minister of Finance, Mr Boutros Boutros-Ghali angrily referring to his colleague, the Education Minister as lacking some basic male equipment. Experience is a great school. It taught me that organisations with a reputation for inflexibility – even such as the EC - will tolerate such a role for consultants and once they (the EC) are not officially informed of the details.

In between these involvements I was appointed by ILO/IPEC sometime in 2003 to evaluate progress being achieved in combating the Worst Forms of Child Labour in Egypt, Sri Lanka and Cambodia. I’ve covered that experience in another section but suffice to say that Cambodia came out of that evaluation somewhat poorly. In 2006, Transparency
International's rating of corrupt countries rated Cambodia as 151st of 163 countries of their Corruption Perceptions Index. The 2007 edition of the same list placed Cambodia at 162nd out of 179 countries. According to this same list, Cambodia was the 3rd most corrupt nation in the South-East Asia area, behind Laos, at 168th, and Myanmar, at joint 179th.

Corruption has added to the wide income disparity within the population. Foreign donors have urged the government to clamp down on pervasive corruption. In 2005, oil and natural gas deposits were found beneath Cambodia's territorial waters, and once commercial extraction begins in 2011, the oil revenues could profoundly affect Cambodia's economy. Observers fear much of the revenue could end up in the hands of the political elites.

**Phnom Penh**

Phnom Penh is a colourful cultural and historic city. It's not large in comparison with a western city, nor has it huge amounts of traffic. It is built around two old Hindu/ Buddhist Wats. There is a long Riverfront which straddles the Tonle Sap River, and which is lined with shops and restaurants. Many of them constructed during the French period of occupation. Around the Royal Palace there are a number of buildings including the library and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, all built in the traditional Khmer architectural style.

Initially, I was surprised to discover that instead of being a hardship post Phnom Penh was a much sought after location by many international consultants. Part of this had to do with the beauty of the city and its surroundings. It was very cheap for Westerners to live in somewhat luxurious lifestyles at very little cost.

A number of long-term consultants have married into Cambodian families. Other consultants had rented classical French residences and with almost no traffic chaos and with good connections to Bangkok and beyond for international missions and for medical care they found that Phnom Penh was the place to be. I was surprised on the whole how much a well-kept secret it was. For the Westerner there was the French influence, which pervaded many parts of the city and many of its restaurants. More, there was the fluency in the French language exercised by the local elite - even after the Khmer Rouge experience.
These long-term expatriates rented their stately homes with formal gardens, palm trees and balconies - all ideal for socialising and parties. In my experience, I found there was a number of high-quality Cambodian, Thai and French restaurants run by long established and often intermarried partnerships between foreigners and locals.

From a social point of view after a time I became aware of subtle distinctions between the long-term officials of the World Bank, the Asian Development Bank, the IMF and senior permanent officials of other donor organisations such as the EC. These generally consorted together and kept their distance from the shorter-term local international consultants, such as myself, who were hired for the various projects. Between the longer-term international residents of whatever nationality one could detect tensions for whatever reasons; whether related to social sense, illicit relationships or even competition for preference by one or other of the international organisations, wasn’t clear. But there were these differences.

Certainly, there was a small group of British consultants who were a little coarse and loud and complained that they found themselves ostracised from the relatively small social circles that existed. Cambodia wasn't my first port of call, and I suppose over time, I had picked up a degree of sensitivity regarding such relationships. Perhaps I was more acceptable because of my daily access to the Deputy Prime Minister and the Secretaries of State. Sometimes I sought to build up social contacts but looking back as often as not I was happy enough to be on my own and to set myself down to observe the city life over a few beers and the delicious menus available almost everywhere.

I always loved to observe the colour and the antics of the street scene in the evening. Sometimes after a stroll along the length of the promenade and along Sisiwat beside the Tonle Sapp river I’d drop in for a beer or a chat at the impressively named ‘Foreign Correspondents Club’. This was a somewhat upmarket drinking establishment at first floor level overlooking the promenade and the river below where I imagined the foreign
correspondents had languished in their leather chairs as they wrote their dispatches on the latest ghastly tragedies – well insulated from the activities - frenzied or otherwise on the streets below.

There are spaces which are designated for public celebrations, and there is one imposing building where normally, I think it is in October and November when the river changes direction, the king inaugurates a traditional race of war canoes representative of the various towns and villages along the Mekong and for which preparations and training would have been going on for months beforehand. The canoes are traditional and I think could have been some 30 m long and about a metre and a half wide. They would accommodate anything up to 30 oarsmen in each.

The interior of one area of the Royal Palace where my Dutch colleague and I were shown the Tale of the Ramayana by our local colleague, the Dean of the University.

By about mid-June, the flow of Mekong and the Bassak River fed by monsoon rains increases to a point where its outlets through the delta near Ho Chi Minh city in Vietnam cannot handle the enormous volumes of water, flooding extensive adjacent floodplains for 4-7 months. At this point, instead of overflowing its banks, its floodwaters reverse the flow of the Tonle Sap River (about 120 km in length), which then has the maximum inflow rate and enters the Great Lake, the largest natural lake in Southeast Asia, increasing the size of the lake from about 2,600 km2 to 10,000 km2 and exceptionally to 13,000 km2 and raising the water level by and average 7m at the height of the flooding. This characteristic of the Tonle Sap makes it the only "river with return" in the world.

After the Mekong’s waters crest and when its downstream channels can again handle the volume of water, the flow reverses and water flows out of the engorged lake. The Great Lake then acts as a natural flood retention basin. When the floods subside, water starts flowing out of the Great Lake, reaching a maximum outflow and over the dry season increases the mainstream flows by about 16 percent, thus helping to reduce salinity intrusion in the lower Mekong Delta in Viet Nam.

By the time the lake water level drops to its minimum surface size, a band 20-30 km wide of inundated forest is left dry with deposits of a new layer of sediment. This forest, which is of
great significance for fish, has in recent years been greatly reduced in size through deforestation.

Bonn Om Teuk (Festival of Boat Racing), the annual boat rowing contest, is the most densely attended Cambodian national festival. It is held at the end of the rainy season when the Mekong River begins to sink back to its normal levels allowing the Tonle Sap River to reverse flow. Then approximately 10% of Cambodia's population comes to this event each year to play games, give thanks to the moon, watch fireworks and attend the boat race in a carnival-type atmosphere.

I had rented an apartment near the river and close to the Old Fish Market. There were about seven apartments in the apartment block and most of them at one time or another were rented to expatriates working as consultants, usually in the Ministry of Education. The apartment with a roof garden on top was rented by a young English statistician. Under him there was a seventy year old plus Australian project planner with two Nigerian ladies; one his partner and the other her sister. They were both considerably younger than he was and I felt that much of his free time was spent in attempting to amuse and entertain them. Below them, for most of the time I was there lived a gay Australian curriculum developer, who was based in Laos, and who had many interesting stories to tell about his life in Vientiane. Then there was me, and occasionally very occasionally such as when family or office colleagues come to visit – I had visitors.

There were always other consultants or government officials to-ing and fro-ing through the apartments. We had many parties on the roof. One either participated in these late night parties, or one was generally woken up late at night, with several roisterers pounding on the door, demanding that you come and join them. I suppose part of this could be attributed to the fact that we were alone and away from our families and wanted company. Certainly, I found that I rarely eat alone in the evenings.

Boats race past the Royal Palace during the annual water festival
The apartment block was directly adjacent to the Last Home boarding house, where backpackers touring Cambodia, would inevitably stay. On other occasions, I would encounter young people coming back from their year’s working period in Australia or New Zealand and using Phnom Penh as the first stepping stone to cover the countries of Southeast Asia. It meant that there was a varied clientele to be expected when we either went for our breakfast or later when we went down for dinner consisting of delicious squid or freshly caught fish, washed down with a few beers or a bottle of wine. We were always welcomed by the owners and their grown-up children, who managed the place. They were delighted with the additional patronage as well as with the opportunity for them to improve their English.

Phnom Penh has so much going for: it is a beautiful residential city with its river, promenade, restaurants and public buildings in the Cambodian traditional style. But yet I cannot pass over a description of the city without describing one of the prime centres of interest for foreigners located there - as well as for visitors and locals alike.

Dhaka has made some attempt to replicate the phenomenon but nothing comes close to the variety or range of goods to be obtained at basement prices in the Russian Market of Phnom Penh. The area covers several hectares and consists of a maze of passageways providing access to garments of all descriptions, souvenirs, DVDs and everything that has ever been manufactured under the sun as well as butcheries and vegetable shops. Originally established by the Russians, when their troops were assigned to the city, the area has moved up to reflect every new development of foreign investment in the Cambodian economy. There are millions
of DVDs and CDs. They were always kept up-to-date. It was easy to see the linkages with the garment industry. But then again, the bargains there were huge. Shirts and jeans were for nothing. My lady acquaintances went there ritually each weekend. Most bought hundreds of up-to-date fashion labelled clothes. It was and I suppose still is a magnet.

Through visiting a place like the Russian Market one can learn a lot about the fortunes and profits that are made from having garments produced by the branded multinationals in these impoverished low-cost countries.

Later, in preparing proposals for detailed EC funding and in negotiating with Brussels I worked with a Frenchwoman who was married into one of the upper class Cambodian families. She has three children, and while she didn't need to work, she enjoyed it as an outlet to take her away from the monotony she associated with being an upper-class socialite. We got on very well and through invitations to her house I learned something about how the top-tier Cambodian families lived and about the swimming pool parties laid on for the rich.

Her husband drove fast racing cars. He had been educated in Canada and had missed the Pol Pot years. His stepfather was the Minister of Health. Once they and their friends celebrated his victory in Formula I car racing; somewhere in Mexico. They saw this as the first time a Cambodian had achieved anything in the inter-national sports arena. I remained friendly with this lady and saw her occasionally during my subsequent mission visits to Phnom Penh. At a later stage she and some friends started an upper-class restaurant overlooking the Tonle Sap. I was always made welcome and received a discount whenever I turned up.

Another restaurant I frequented was owned by a Basque Frenchman. Again it looked out on the Tonle Sap. He had lived most of his life in Cambodia after finishing service with the French Foreign Legion. I try to improve my French by speaking to him as often as I could. He oversaw the management of the restaurant, strutting along with a monkey perched on his shoulder. I thought I was making good progress with French until my two colleagues from Utrecht, called by on their way back from Manila. Somehow I had mentioned to the French man that I've would be bringing two lady colleagues to his restaurant. He understood me to say that I wanted him to put the three of us up in one of his bedrooms. If such was his understanding then I'm sure I went up high in his estimation. I am sure his estimation of me peaked when I duly arrived with the ladies. Both were fluent in French and early on they smelt a rat when my man suggested we three go up and inspect the bedroom he had prepared for us. When all was explained and all the ruffled feathers had been smoothed down he forgave me. I think we all saw the sunny side of the misunderstanding.

The apogee of French influence, built during the French occupation was the Officers' Club. It is a huge building with such an imposing facade and surrounded by two or three enormous swimming pools. After the French departure it had been transformed under various guises. Finally it became part of an exclusive South East Asia hotel chain. When I went out to celebrate someone's birthday we were advised we could order wine costing over US$ 1,000 a bottle!
Fishing at 6am on the Mekong River – before the sun came up. That’s me waiting to fall off the steep narrow ladder.

Another pastime for early Saturday mornings was to go fishing with a Sri Lankan friend, who came from a privileged banking background. We hired the boat and he brought his servant along to hook on the bait for us while the man himself or I would cast it. I immediately saw it as reflecting the relationship between the nineteenth century Irish gentleman fisherman and his gillie. I’m not sure whether we ever caught anything but a bottle or two of beer before the sun came up was most refreshing. It also gave us the opportunity to come ashore on the other east bank of the Mekong River which although close to Phnom Penh as the crow flies was very remote by land. We’d organise a grilled chicken breakfast and eat it with the last of the beer. I found the local villagers on the other side to be most hospitable and friendly towards us strangers.

More and more I’m aware I’m not exactly alone in my predilection for the country. The tourism industry is the country's second-greatest source of hard currency after the textile industry. Most visitors arrive through Siem Reap with the remainder through Phnom Penh and other destinations. Another tourist destination I loved to visit for both its simplicity as well as its superb views over the islands and the ocean was Sihanoukville in the south east which has several beaches and which could be visited over a long weekend from Phnom Penh.

The Greater Angkor area

To recap Angkor is a name conventionally applied to the region of Cambodia serving as the seat of the Khmer empire that flourished from approximately the ninth century to the fourteenth century A.D. More precisely I’m informed the Angkorian period may be defined as the period from 802 A.D., when the Khmer Hindu monarch declared himself the "universal monarch" and "god-king" of Cambodia, until 1431 A.D., when invaders sacked the Khmer capital causing its population to migrate south to the area of Phnom Penh.
The ruins of Angkor are located amid forests and farmland to the north of the Great Lake (Tonle Sap) and south of the Kulen Hills, near modern day Siem Reap, and are a UNESCO World Heritage Site. The temples range in scale from nondescript piles of brick rubble scattered through rice fields to the magnificent Angkor Wat, said to be the world's largest single religious monument. Many of the temples at Angkor have been restored, and together they comprise the most significant site of Khmer architecture.

Angkor Wat, Cambodia, Ta Prohm, a haunting place. Note how the trees have grown out of the stone crevices of the temple to give a very surreal effect. You will see this everywhere throughout the temple complexes.

In 2007 an international team of researchers using satellite photographs and other modern techniques concluded that Angkor had been the largest pre-industrial city in the world with an urban sprawl of 3000 square kilometres. The closest rival to Angkor, the Mayan city of Tikal in Guatemala, was between 100 and 150 square kilometres in total size. The Angkor temple complex stretches over a vast area with tens if not hundreds of temples, monasteries and convents. Siem Reap which translated means victory over the Thais - here the people have long memories - is the administrative town and airport for visitors.

I found the overall temple complex to be most impressive. So in my spare time I followed up my interest with selective reading. The following is the result. I quote from my guidebook to the effect that the world renowned Angkor Wat is a temple built for the king Suryavarman II in the early 12th century as his state temple and capital city. As the best-preserved temple at the site, it is the only one to have remained a significant religious centre since its foundation: first Hindu, dedicated to Vishnu – and then Buddhist. The temple is the epitome of the high classical style of Khmer architecture.

Angkor Wat combines two basic plans of Khmer temple architecture: the temple mountain and the later galleried temple, based on early South Indian Hindu architecture, with key
features such as the Jagati. It is designed to represent Mount Meru, home of the devas in Hindu mythology: within a moat and an outer wall 3.6 kilometres (2.2 mi) long are three rectangular galleries, each raised above the next. The temple is admired for the grandeur and harmony of the architecture, its extensive bas-reliefs and for the numerous devatas (guardian spirits) adorning its walls.

In 1177, Angkor was sacked by the Chams, the traditional enemies of the Khmer. In the late 13th century the King who was Hindu was deposed by his son-in-law, who had spent the previous 10 years in Sri Lanka becoming ordained as a Buddhist monk. Hence, the new King decided to convert the official religion of the empire from Hindu to Buddhist. Given the constant political corruption not to speak of the violence of the time, I’d surmise that the citizens were quick to follow a faith founded on tranquillity without the need for material gain and power. This apparently made the conversion relatively easy. Hence, Angkor Wat was converted from Hindu to Theravada Buddhist use, which continues to the present day. The Angkor temples are unusual in that although they were somewhat neglected after the 16th century as noted earlier it and the temples in its immediate vicinity were never completely abandoned. I suppose its preservation unlike many of the others can be due in part to the fact that its moat provided some protection from encroachment by the jungle.

One of the first Western visitors to the temple was Antonio da Magdalena, a Portuguese monk who visited in 1586 and said that it "is of such extraordinary construction that it is not possible to describe it with a pen, particularly since it is like no other building in the world. It has towers and decoration and all the refinements which the human genius can conceive of". However, the temple was popularised in the West only in the mid-19th century on the publication of Henri Mouhot's travel notes. The French explorer wrote of it:
"One of these temples: a rival to that of Solomon and erected by some ancient Michelangelo might take an honourable place beside our most beautiful buildings. It is grander than anything left to us by Greece or Rome, and presents a sad contrast to the state of barbarism in which the nation is now plunged."

Angkor Wat required considerable restoration in the 20th century, mainly the removal of accumulated earth and vegetation. Work was interrupted by the civil war and Khmer Rouge control of the country during the 1970s and 1980s, but relatively small damage was done during this period. In January 2003 I was told that riots erupted in Phnom Penh when a false rumour circulated that a Thai soap-opera actress had claimed that Angkor Wat belonged to Thailand. Personally, I came to the personal opinion that the classic Angkor Wat while truly amazing was one of the least attractive of the sites in the area we visited. I found there were serious practical problems with flights of stone stairs so steep as to be downright dangerous.

One week after I went to work in the EC Delegation I was told that I should carry out a survey of educational and vocational training buildings in the Siem Reap area. I was delighted at the prospect because I knew that this offered me an opportunity to spend a weekend poking around the greater Angkor Wat complex. Anyone who has lived in or visited Cambodia, quickly learnt about the complex and the often surreal atmosphere of some of the monasteries; especially in the less well-known monasteries and converts. There was one special convent, which is famous for the trees sprouting out from crevices in the stonework. It is truly a fantastic sight. The picture above is only indicative. You really have to be there to take in the strange sight of tall trees growing up and out from domestic or institutional architecture.
Anyway, I flew to Siem Reap, hired a four wheeled drive vehicle, and went around looking at the various schools. I was genuinely impressed to see how much some committed school principals could do – even with very little. They allocated considerable time to staff development and to helping with local social problems. There were very few learning materials available in the schools and those that were there had been supplied at some sacrifice by the local parents. Comically, when I was in a classroom talking to the children I remember a cow grazing outside put her head through the open space used for a window and gave a friendly belch.

A number of the country roads were impassable, with bridges washed away, and we always had to do our best under the circumstances. The picture above was taken by my German colleague after a bridge had been washed away and an enterprising local girl on her motorbike offered me a lift to see a school. Travelling in the countryside outside Phnom Penh was always an opportunity to meet and to try to communicate with these lovely, friendly and hospitable people.

I was somewhat disappointed to visit a vocational technical school, built by the International Labour Office, the organisation I had worked for in Pakistan. The building was fine, but no equipment or materials had been supplied much to the frustration of the local district officials to say nothing of the parents and pupils. This wasn't unique. I wondered whether the institution would ever provide the training it was supposed to.

On the other hand, a French expatriate working with local people had established as a tourist venue a silk farm, but also to provide employment for the locals. Silk production had been a traditional occupation in the area but like so many things had been utterly destroyed during the Khmer Rouge wars. I was amazed to see the various steps that have to be gone through from planting mulberries to sourcing silk insects, in rearing them, then easing the insects from their cocoons, and taking and preparing the threads on spools, colouring them and eventually producing raw silk. It was a contrast to the more institutional ILO investment which was so lacking. I marvelled at the commitment and energy required to source the silk
larvae and bring them – perhaps illegally - from China to this rather backward location. Then there were the challenges to provide the training in horticulture and the downstream marketing activities required. Travelling through the countryside was always an opportunity to be amazed and to learn new things.

Over my time in Cambodia I traversed a fairly representative area from the Thai border to the north and then down to Sihanoukville on the Gulf of Thailand. I was constantly aware of the attempts by Thailand and Vietnam to nibble away and to absorb areas traditionally disputed or belonging to areas previously absorbed. This led to instability along the country’s borders. Internally there is much illegal logging. There is the eviction of tenants by the indigenous army generals and the other elites because of the absence of written title to the lands worked by so many of the farming population.

While it was my personal experience in dealing with the government that people at the top were not all corrupted it was clear to me that the country has a long way to go if it is to provide satisfactory democratic rights to the vast majority of its citizens. Even at the rural level girls and young women are particularly at risk. I have referred elsewhere to the abuse of working children and the trafficking that goes on with the police often standing by.
I grew up during the Vietnam War. Like many other young Europeans as a student I marched and demonstrated against that war. Now some 30 years later the excesses and abuses by American in Vietnam are becoming recognised - even in the US. In retrospect I shudder to think of the manpower and material committed to destroying Vietnam in the name of democracy. Through my visits I have learned to respect and admire these proud sophisticated people. So I ask myself - why did they have to suffer so much? How simple it appears to have been for those few men like Kennedy and Lyndon Johnson at the top of US administrations to come to terrible decisions to impose their will on a much poorer country with enormous and horrible consequences for the targeted population.

Thus it came as a huge surprise to me to find myself standing outside the Presidential Palace in Ho Chi Minh City - then Saigon - and to see the point through which that iconic picture of a Vietcong tank as it broke its way into the Presidential Compound signifying effectively the end of the war was taken. In Hanoi, I regularly passed the classical facade of the Ho Chi Minh Mausoleum. I suppose this man was portrayed to many in the West almost as the Anti-Christ. And yet there in Hanoi he is revered as father of the nation.
My history book informs me that the people of Vietnam broke away from China in AD 938 after their victory at the battle of Bạch Đằng River. Successive dynasties flourished along with geographic and political expansion deeper into Southeast Asia, until eventually with the rise of the European powers the country was colonized by the French in the mid-19th century. Efforts to resist the French eventually led to their expulsion from the country in the mid-20th century, leaving a nation divided politically into two countries. Fighting between the two sides continued during the Vietnam War, ending with a North Vietnamese victory over South Vietnam and its U.S. allies in 1975.

Emerging from this prolonged military engagement, the war-ravaged nation was politically isolated. The government’s centrally planned economic decisions as taken by the victorious North Vietnamese are now admitted by it to have hindered post-war reconstruction and their treatment of the losing side is said to have engendered more resentment than reconciliation. In 1986, it instituted economic and political reforms and began a path towards international reintegration. By 2000, it had established diplomatic relations with most nations. Its economic growth over the past decade has been among the highest in the world.

My first involvement in Vietnam took place with two linked missions in mid and late 2003. In August 2003, the Government of Vietnam had unveiled its Action Plan for the Education for All, which envisaged support being provided by the donor community supporting education on a sector-wide basis. The objective of the first, the Identification Mission, as established in the project Terms of Reference (TORs), was to assess the priorities put forward by the Vietnam education reform process and to match EC aid priorities for the education sector with the Government Education Strategy 2001-2010. The targeted budget support proposed for the Plan constituted a transition between a traditional investment project approach which had been the main avenue for donor support to Vietnam up to that date and an untied budget support operation in the framework of a medium-term expenditure framework. The missions culminated in the preparation of recommendations for a proposed new EC funded project. The provinces we visited were Hai Phong City and Quang Ninh and Lai Chau Provinces in the north and Quang Nam Province and Da Nang City in the centre and Tay Ninh Province and Ho Chi Minh City in the south.

Later during October and November 2004, we prepared an independent Final Evaluation of the Support to the Ministry of Education and Training Project (SMOET) provided by the EC over the previous five years. This had been quite a successful project and notwithstanding the defensiveness and often downright hostility we encountered in interviewing the European management team. Then in October and November 2009 I was team leader for the evaluation of a big World Bank, EC and other donor budget support project for education. In late 2010 along with our local counterpart expert Viet, we evaluated another EC project providing management and technological assistance again to education. Incidentally, that was the last mission of my career.

**Education in Vietnam**

Education enjoys a high social prestige in the Vietnamese society. Again like Cambodia parents the communities are prepared to make considerable financial and social contribution to it. This high social value priority and the government’s policy to invest in human resource development of the country is reflected in the significant increases in recent years in levels of public spending on education at the central and provincial level. This increased spending has
been supported by a robust development of the economy with average annual growth rates of over 7%.

During the last 10 years education across Vietnam has accomplished tremendous progress. The primary net enrolment rate has increased from 86% in 1990 to 94% in 2000, the drop-out rate has declined from 12% to less than 3%, the repetition rate from 9% to less than 5% and the completion rate has increased from 47% to more than 75%.

I’m thronged by excited school children in a visit to a school in Quang Nam province – much to the amusement of my local counterpart and the teachers.

The general literacy rate in Vietnam with 93% (age 15+, in 2000) is much higher in comparison to the average literacy rate of the East Asia and Pacific Region with 86%.

The vast majority of citizens have enjoyed some form of schooling and almost all children have access to primary education.

The Ministry of Education and Training had the mandate and the leading role in co-operation with other concerned ministries for the implementation of the Education Development Strategic Plan (EDSP) for 2001-2010 and to develop and implement five-year and annual educational plans in accordance with the EDSP and broader socio-economic development plans. Furthermore, this mandate requires it “to guide, to control, to monitor, to collect the information on the implementation and to prepare periodical reports.” The Plan had identified that while “after 15 years of renovation, Vietnam education has gained important achievements but (it) is still facing weaknesses and shortages.”

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7 Source: WB, Primary Education for Disadvantaged Children Project, April 2003, p. 74. That does not exclude the much higher illiteracy rates among ethnic minorities and particularly amongst women.

8 See Education Development Strategic Plan for 2001-2010
The Plan certainly didn’t pull its punches. It identified education management as the central weakness of the system. “… the level of education management does not catch up with the practice or needs of development when the economy is experiencing the change-over from a centrally planned to a market economy with socialist orientation⁹. It does not coordinate well and use effectively the state and social resources for education. The change in the thinking as well as the mode of management is characterised by a slow decision-making in term of strategic orientations and policy at macro level.”

Da Nang: I was impressed by the work being done for children with disabilities and would wish to have seen more of it.

Another shortcoming highlighted was that generally and contrary to numbers and progression the quality of education remained quite poor due to the presence of under-qualified teachers, inefficient teaching methods, low remuneration of teachers and limited “time-in-school”. On the whole, in Vietnam education was very much a part-time occupation for pupils and for teachers alike. I was much impressed by this incisive analysis and still find it well worth quoting.

Notwithstanding these drawbacks and as I came to be more familiar with Vietnam and made some acquaintance with ordinary Vietnamese citizens I learned to admire them for their positive approach to living and their pride in their achievements. All over Vietnam I noticed there is the sense of the people having a considerable degree of national pride. My friend and counterpart dismissed the American War as almost a sideshow to the subsequent and more recent war with the Chinese. It was his impression that the country had got over the sense of extensive injustice and feelings of hostility to the Americans. He pointed out the all-pervasive presence of Pepsi-Cola and Coke as examples of practical reconciliation!

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⁹ This is just another signal from a developing country of its intentions to shed its communist past.
A glimpse of shopping in a traditional Hanoi shopping area.

Vietnam presents a powerful contrast to Cambodia the only other country in that part of south-east Asia I know fairly well. It is a far more populous state. It has absorbed many minority peoples into its population.

Once I asked my friend why the Vietnamese saw it as necessary to invite the donors such as the European Commission to support areas of development such as education? I gave it is my opinion that with the children's enrolment rates and the general support provided by the government for education being as high as they were there wasn't a huge case for calling upon Western European countries to contribute. He saw things in a different light. In earlier times Vietnam was a vassal of China. For hundreds of years there has been a deep mistrust amongst the Vietnamese in relation to the designs they believe neighbouring China has upon their country. At the same time they are aware of the immense and growing power that China has. This intimidates them. Following the American War, as it is called in Vietnam, there remains some antipathy towards the Americans. Against this, Europe with its projection of soft power through the medium of aid and development partnerships is seen as unthreatening and at the same time as having much to offer.

The Vietnamese admire many aspects of the European way of life. Under the French occupation they experienced both positive and negative sides of French culture at first hand. A number of their most important revolutionaries spent some time in France either as students or as labourers. They see closer relations to Europe as leading to improved industrialisation of the country. Education is seen as a particular strength of European society at large. He emphasised they didn't want European tanks any more than they wanted Chinese or American. But the European Union is seen as neutral and even as benevolent towards Vietnam.

Only after I had been to visit Vietnam have I realised how cosmopolitan it is in relation to the main world religions. While there are the majority aspects of Buddhism, Confucianism and Taoism, I was surprised at the relatively high profile given to Christianity. I suppose the Americans during the Vietnam War decided that recognition of this relatively high Christian
profile might reduce support for the War at home. I was advised that - apart from the Philippines - given all of the other south-east Asian Nations that Vietnam has the highest proportion of Christians in its population. I remember I was informed with some pride by my Buddhist friend and colleague that Ho Chi Minh worked on the basis that “irrespective of religion or conviction - we were all Vietnamese first”.

Hanoi is beautiful city. I much prefer it to Ho Chi Minh City, the former Saigon, which I consider to be a somewhat brash melting pot and with a modern chic as opposed to the more conservative tree-lined boulevards of the capital. The city is built around several lakes. Pedestrians have direct access to the lake shores. Along the shores there are attractive restaurants and while these are a little more expensive than the norm their location and the traditional culture and atmosphere one finds in many cases makes them well worth any additional small cost.

The central part of Hanoi is located around the Roman Catholic Cathedral built by the French. One day, it was a Sunday morning; I visited the cathedral to find it full of worshippers. Out from the centre there radiate tree-lined avenues with coffee shops, restaurants and high-quality leather, silk and souvenir shops all very busy. It was my delight for an evening out: first to stroll and observe the way the local Vietnamese live their lives; to watch the streams of motor cyclists in their hundreds and sometimes thousands manoeuvre across junctions and roundabouts; then occasionally to stop to examine, to touch and maybe to buy some small things for taking home. Finally, with my colleagues and sometimes accompanied by local Vietnamese friends we’d select a restaurant and spend an evening over a delicious meal of Vietnamese food and Australian wine discussing many things including the project, the political situation and trying to learn more about issues of significance to the Vietnamese.

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10 Thirteen I think.
Evening shoppers in Hanoi.

It was during these conversations especially with my friend and counterpart, who unusually has two PhDs granted from Russian universities and who was director of an advisory institute to the Vietnamese Ministry of Education and Training (“we advise - but they don't listen”) that I learned something of the background and contributions made by the ordinary Vietnamese people during the American War. He could well recollect while at school the occasions when he and his classmates were strongly affected by the sacrifices made by individual fellow-classmates who had enrolled in the Vietcong. It was customary for these students - prior to their departure as volunteers - to simply stand up, to bow and to announce to their schoolmates that they wished to be excused from school as they were enrolling to fight for the independence of Vietnam and were prepared to sacrifice their lives if necessary. Even as he explained this to me in English over a few glasses I could sense he was profoundly moved and almost in tears.

Earlier, he had been informed by the North Vietnamese authorities that as one of the best students of his year he had been selected to participate in a scholarship programme to Russian academies and universities. It would be his duty when the war was over and victory had been achieved to serve the country by bringing to it the benefit of the skills and knowledge he had accumulated abroad. He was not invited - he was given his orders. In Russia, he found it very difficult to reconcile his new life as a student socialising with student parties, Russian girlfriends as well as his studies and the opportunities they gave him - with the sacrifices being made at home by his Vietcong schoolmates many of whom he would never expect to see again.

I have many wonderful memories. During my second mission I learned that a Dutch diplomat, whom I had known very well in Pakistan, had been transferred to Hanoi. Subsequently we were to meet again in the Yemen. She very kindly invited the mission team to her residence, which was a magnificent traditional Vietnamese house built directly overlooking one of the lakes. We spent a wonderful evening inspecting the house, her
collection of antique furniture and tapestries gathered from countries she had lived in and spending the evening sitting; looking out on the lake and sipping wine.

On mission on my own with my local Vietnamese who accompanied me as a friend as well as an interpreter, we visited the city of Da Nang. During the Vietnam War I think it was an important American air base. It was always the centre of one conflict or another. There we stayed in a hotel complex owned by the Vietnamese military.

Another evening we sat around a typical kitchen table which had been taken out on to the beach directly overlooking the South China Sea. We had an amazing meal as the evening turned to twilight and the ships lights, as they passed up and down, glowed and became ever more striking. We started with crustaceans. We followed that with fish and then finally we had lobster and all washed down with a very dry white Australian wine. We talked and we chatted very animatedly and wittily on a range of subjects. Then I was surprised when a bottle of whiskey was produced and someone began to grind powder from a cow’s or deer’s horn into a cup and then poured it into the whiskey. I was a little taken aback and asked what they were polluting the whiskey with? He explained that they had developed a high regard for my companionship. They wished to celebrate this by presenting me with an aphrodisiac. We laughed and I mocked them saying that while I very much appreciated the gesture I couldn't see it would be too much use to us. But I appreciated the oriental gesture of friendship combined with the sense of humour.

While in Ho Chi Minh City I was brought by the Lady Director of Education to one of their best middle schools. One had to be impressed by the wide use of language laboratories and of computer technology. In an aside I was given to understand that this was the school chosen by the government elite to educate their children. It was no ordinary school. In taking leave of the headmistress I congratulated her on the excellence of the leadership and the facilities provided by the school. I almost brought the house down when I suggested that rather than
have Europe provide assistance to Vietnam that the authorities might consider seconding her to Ireland to provide assistance in improving the quality of education back at home.

My friend insisted on showing me everything he thought I would be interested in and especially locations and events dating from the Vietnam War. One afternoon in Ho Chi Minh city he brought me to a most luxurious restaurant which had been located in the immediate vicinity of the then US Embassy. As I gazed around me through the palms and over the marble and other signs of opulence I wondered what it had been like during the last days of the war when the friends and allies from the top bracket of South Vietnamese society sensed they were running out of time and were clamouring to ensure that they and their families escaped from the oncoming Vietcong forces; using whatever means they could to call in obligations from the Americans to ensure they made it out on the last helicopters. In my mind's eye I had those desperate pictures of the last helicopters taking off from the roof of the US ambassador's residence.

In contrast, there was another occasion when I was invited out by the local Director of Education to a dinner organised for the teachers of several schools in the district. It was a very informal location with high spirits in evidence everywhere. They were singing; there was drinking and there was lots of evidence of goodwill. I don't think in Ireland you would find a similar situation where school management and the teachers could sit down together in such a happy way.
The historic capital of Vietnam, Hue, sits astride a truly majestic and beautiful river, the Song Huong (Perfume River). The north-bank is host to its share of hotels and restaurants, but the area is dominated by the old fortified city known as the Citadel, spread across more than 5 square kilometres of ground and crowding out development on that side of the river. The south bank of the river has been developed as park cum promenade, with an eclectic variety of public sculptures on display. Like Halong Bay to the north, the complex of tombs, pagodas and palaces throughout Hue and its surrounds has been designated a UNESCO World Heritage site. But to the Vietnamese psyche shaped by centuries of war and struggle, tempered by nearly forty years of communist rule, this imperialist heritage was seen by my friends to be largely irrelevant and completely disconnected from the present.

I was fortunate to go again on mission again during September and October 2009. It was my fourth time and I certainly was amazed at the changes I saw after a gap of five years. One example was the huge industrial development that had taken place. Earlier this was a feature confined to Ho Chi Minh City or Da Nang. But driving from the port town of Haiphong some 60 miles south to Hanoi I was taken aback by the huge number of factories which had been built and which carried signs with flags signifying inward investment by Japanese, South Korean, American or European multi-nationals. While many of these factories had come to Vietnam due to low wage levels even in comparison with neighbouring China it was quite clear that the government viewed this merely as a first phase.

The aim was to achieve high added-value through the rapid development of skills and abilities for Vietnam’s entry into the knowledge economy. To achieve this there has been enormous pressure and responsibility placed on the education and labour ministries to create a labour force with the skills and knowledge required. I was informed that they have achieved Education for All at the primary level in 2004/05. They were about to achieve universal access to lower secondary education and to follow this by 2011 with universal access to upper secondary education. Already the economy was being geared towards mirroring Western achievements. I’m advised that in recent times a number of Western countries including Ireland have entered into negotiations for agreements with the government to create long-term relationships through the establishment of technical institutes at the university level.
Ironically in 2009 at sixty six years of age I was the youngest of my team of three. The mission was to carry out a final evaluation of US $150 million of targeted budget support for education in all 65 provinces of the country. It was something of a revelation to be working with somewhat mature men; one of them aged seventy two!

There was quite a lot of pressure but we did manage reasonably well. One of the officials of the EC Delegation let it be known that she felt that she was being treated at times by three elderly gentlemen who seemed to think she was a girl just out of college. I suppose we would have to admit some guilt on this charge. One of my colleagues received a critical e-mail from her and forwarded it to his wife in England with some critical remarks of his own. Unfortunately, his wife somehow pressed the wrong button and the e-mail with the attached critical comments was sent back to the EC official.

While all three of us might have agreed with the sentiments I found myself as the team leader to be in a somewhat awkward situation. The colleague who sent the e-mail, a U.K. professor, refused to meet the official or to recant in any way and I suppose it did cast a shadow over the latter part of our mission. I’m well aware at my age that older doesn’t necessarily equate with being wiser!
Our mission was concentrated in Hanoi and the Northern provinces close to it. While in the city there was development there were some things which had not changed. During peak hours the streets were still full of light motorcycles – thousands of them. They come through from all directions. As someone remarked “it’s bad enough now to risk being run over by a motorcycle - but what will happen when with development they transfer from riding motorbikes to bringing cars into the old town. There will be mayhem!”

While there has been huge development Hanoi has managed to maintain much of its 19th-century beauty. I suppose being built around so many lakes helps to inject a sense of calm which is missing from other cities. We in the team particularly enjoyed walking to the lake located in a main tourist area. One restaurant there we christened ‘Jim’s Place’ as he was the first to have discovered it. Then the area around the classical Opera House remains as beautiful as ever. But with a population of some 85 million and with more than four million living in Hanoi the place was buzzing.

Part of our mission was planned to cover the Central Highlands area. We had our air tickets bought and all preparations in place when one of my colleagues noticed in the newspaper that a typhoon was forecast to hit the area. Vietnam with its long north-south coast is visited by the order of twenty typhoons a year. They do enormous damage. The one that came ashore near Da Nang involved substantial loss of life. We abandoned any prospect of visiting the adjacent Highland areas which were caught in the eye of the storm.

Instead we spent more time visiting six mountainous and remote provinces in the northeast and northwest of the country. In one of them Long Soc, I visited schools which were not more than 5 km distant from the Chinese border. These were areas where a substantial amount of Vietnam’s ethnic minorities are living. Some thirty years ago in the late 1970s and following the American War and the subsequent invasion of Cambodia and expulsion of Pol Pot this part of Vietnam was invaded by China with great loss of life. The Chinese only withdrew following threats by the Russians to mount a nuclear attack on a Chinese city. To my recollection there was no mention of this in the Western news media at the time.
I asked one of the locals as to the porosity of the border. He replied that there were severe restrictions but they managed to avoid many of them and there were holes through which commerce could pass. There was marriage across the border – fairly frequently. More immediately visible in the main town of the Province were the supermarkets filled with Chinese hardware, software and children’s toys. I bought an iPod – which would sell normally in Ireland for about €150 for less than €10. Unfortunately I could only access what seemed to be hundreds of Chinese songs and music on it.

In the provinces we interviewed officials of the People’s Committees and of the devolved Ministries of Education and Finance. The picture above was taken in one of these ministries. The official who took the photograph has managed to position me in front of the revered Ho Chi Minh. Even in present day liberalising Vietnam not to have done so could be considered a serious omission. Having said that it may be noted that neither Lenin nor Karl Marx look to be very amused.

The country has been investing hugely. This has paid enormous economic dividends and it is projected that by 2012 Vietnam will no longer be classified internationally as a developing country. It will have achieved the status of a middle-income country. Already it has school attendance rates for primary education levels comparable with countries in the West. I was impressed by the quality and standard of construction of primary and secondary schools. They certainly were of superior design and construction to what we normally encounter across Europe. On one occasion we were taken to see a dormitory school complex setup for different minority children. It was superb. On the other hand I had some forebodings regarding the institutionalised behaviours imposed on six to nine-year-old children.
A dormitory school in Lang Soc near the Chinese border with ethnic minority children lined up for their early-morning exercises.

A corollary already noted is that while substantial funding was made available for education parents still paid substantially to have their children in schools. As a team we missed a focus on quality education standards. Their assessment of quality was made through using fundamental school level standards as a proxy. This meant that quality as measured related directly to inputs such as teacher education levels, provision of toilets or of school textbooks rather than by measurement of actual learning achievement. We noticed from records of the annual reviews of education progress carried out by the government and the donors that maximum attention had been paid to financial management and audit and it was only comparatively recently that the government had begun to concentrate on education quality and learning achievement as important key indicators of success.

Travelling across the country I noticed that there was huge investment in ensuring speed limits were observed and that all motorcyclists wore helmets. On one occasion the car I was travelling in was flagged down for speeding. It had been picked up on a traffic radar system. Things looked as if they were going to be embarrassing and that the car would be impounded. This was avoided by a quick thinking lady official’s decision to telephone the Chairman of the People’s Committee, the most senior local politician. He gave an instruction and we were released immediately.

Provincial and district council representatives often took us out to a few schools so as to see for ourselves the situation on the ground. Some of this was fairly mixed and was readily admitted to be the case by the officials accompanying us. Usually there was very friendly discussion and good social intercourse. On several occasions I was taken by surprise to be invited for a meal and then to be presented with small glasses of rice wine which had quite a kick. The picture below shows the lady, who is the Director of Education at the district level, hosting a meal for me and leading in proposing a toast to the European Union and to me. Another Council Director presented us with a case of rice wine bottles.
A happy occasion in one of the Long Soc districts.

There is no substitute for face-to-face discussion and it was very gratifying to learn that our interviewees appreciated the interest and the range of technical enquiries that we made. Personally I found the officials to be proud of their achievements but at the same time they could be very open and self-critical. In other ways they were quite like their counterparts would be in similar departments and schools across Ireland. I certainly never had any sensation or impression that I was being watched or controlled in any way.

Vietnamese food is simple and for me was dominated by fish, shrimp and squid. Given its long and narrow geography fishing plays a very important role in the economy. Food preparation and presentation is most impressive. I was very taken by Vietnamese food.

A short circuit around the centre of Hanoi

Hanoi 2011 will be celebrating its 1,000 anniversary but its history goes back much further than that. There are the excavated remains of peoples living in the area some 4,000 years ago. In the busy time I spent there I didn’t get out and see so many places but I think there are three very much worth mentioning. In describing them perhaps I may be going back over earlier paragraphs but perhaps in travelling alongside my wife Daphne on one occasion I learned a little bit more. The first of the three places is Hoan Kiem Lake with its lakeside restaurant and bar, the Ngoc Song Temple and parts of the old city with each street originally devoted to a particular guild or trade and which caters preponderantly for the modern tourist industry.
Perhaps during my previous missions to the city I had built up a rosy a picture of a city with narrow tree-lined streets and beautiful small restaurants. Temperatures can however reach as high as between 33 and 36°C. Nonetheless, I consider a Hanoi to be one of the most beautiful cities of its size that I know.

It’s a warm friendly city. I always see in my mind’s eye groups of local people sitting on small stools on the open pavement and enjoying their cups of coffee and their conversations and oblivious of the tourists passing by. On many occasions I’ve asked myself how could the US have unleashed such a terrible war on these people? Given that I could appear to be American and that most of their experience would be with Americans I was impressed that I didn’t encounter unpleasantness of any kind during the whole periods of my stay there. Yes, I was aware of the bureaucratic sensitivities and of the need to comply with procedure in relation to meetings or addressing people. But people, whether officials or waiters, or guides or schoolteachers were always pleasant and open and instinctively courteous and well mannered.
Old Hanoi; a banyan tree built into the city architecture.

In taking a circular and leisurely stroll around the lake you transfer from the Opera House area with its luxury hotels of the French colonial era and going clockwise pass a lovely lakeside open-air restaurant. Behind the buildings fronting on to the lake you have the fashionable shops and tree-lined streets around St Joseph’s Cathedral. Further on you pass the ANZ (Australian/New Zealand) Bank where I used to extract literally millions of Vietnamese Dong; using my visa card and constantly looking back over my shoulder as I stuffed the notes in whatever pockets or spaces I had.

Then you arrive at major traffic junctions with hundreds - and at peak hours you will encounter more than hundreds and sometimes thousands - of motorcycles and occasional cars converging together. Making crossovers at this point is certainly not for the weak hearted. A little further on there is the Buddhist Ngoc Song Temple which is still in use with its beautiful bridge and centuries old statues and icons. It is in this location the legend describes the sword being cast by the dying Emperor into the lake and being snatched and taken away into the depths by the faithful tortoise.

Still further on and on your left you will see the palatial offices of the People’s Committee for Hanoi. This is where the political power base that manages Hanoi resides. But it was explained to me that for more than 400 years there has been decentralisation across Vietnam. I was interested to notice when I visited the Temple of Literature that from medieval times academic and administrative candidates for recognition and ennoblement as a result of their studies were first proposed at the district and then subsequently at the provincial level for submission to the King. For the tertiary level viva voce the king participated personally. So this bottom-up system is not any recent phenomenon introduced by the Communist Party. Rather it appears to have had a very strong and enduring tradition.

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11 The Vietnamese Dong had an exchange rate of 26,000 to the Euro.
Earlier I was reading my assessment of the 2005 mission where I anticipated there would be difficulties in providing EU funding to the State Treasury - given this degree of autonomy at the local level and of which I utterly approved. The structural problem that arises out of all this is that money from the donors earmarked and agreed with the central government for particular purposes can legally be diverted by the 65 provinces to meet other priorities. There’s no question of corruption. It’s simply that the money isn’t always spent for the purposes for which it was provided but can be diverted to counter events such as natural disasters and similar emergencies. I suppose I found it a bit ironic that the reference to this in my earlier report was never picked up either by the European Commission or the other donors. Maybe in preparing our draft final report we did our best and glossed over this situation as best we could and in a diplomatic way. This anomaly which I think is unique to Vietnam has certainly had major implications for expenditures provided by the donors for education nationally.

Walking a little further on and overlooking a broad platform on which the children are accustomed to skate there is more than life-size statue of a heroic figure from Vietnamese history. I suppose I should have gone over and looked at it but I think the inscription stated that he lived for maybe 40 or 50 years during the 10th century or possibly the 12th century? If it was the latter he must be the highly revered Vietnamese general who rallied his people against the Mongolian invasion which came ashore from their boats in the Halong Bay area.

There the guide referred to him with a great deal of reverence. Apparently the Mongolians were poor sailors. So the Vietnamese general took advantage of the tide and at the entrances between the many islands he placed vertical stakes below high tide level. Skirmishes were

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12 This is a legend similar to the Arthurian one where one of the early emperors on his death threw his sword into the lake to be taken into the care of the faithful, wise and long-lived tortoise.
planned to take place at high tide level and the Vietnamese ships rapidly withdrew closely pursued by the larger Mongolian vessels. Many of them were pierced and sank as the tide dropped and with great loss of life. The general had had his archers climb to the top of the steep mountainous islands and conceal themselves. As the Mongolian ships drew close these archers rained arrows and other weapons down on their exposed decks. I heard this account several times. When I asked one well-educated guide as to who were the greatest figures he considered in Vietnamese history - he replied without hesitation that one was this general who conquered the Mongols. The other was General Giap who defeated the French at Dien Bien Phu. The Vietnamese have long memories.

Further on again and you pass by the white marble monument to the martyrs of the American War. Close by this is a stone hillock. This is the place where on Saturday afternoons you will see newly-wed couples posing for pictures. I was lucky enough to be passing with my camera and to take a quick snap of a beautiful young bride. From the little experience I have in relation to weddings I would imagine that her wedding dress would sell at a premium in any Dublin wedding boutique.

Further on again and a left turn away from the lake and after 10 minutes’ walk we are back directly opposite the Opera House. Earlier, from my guidebook I was recommended to visit a three-storey market some distance from the lake. I went to see it expecting it to be like the Russian Market in Phnom Penh and was most disappointed.

It was hot and as I strolled back towards the lake I was delighted to discover the joys of the Metropole Hotel. This is a beautiful hotel dating from the French colonial period. It is very, very expensive. However a glass of mango juice and a beer beside the swimming pool made me feel I was superior person and mixing at the top with my peers.
The Metropole Hotel with all its style and elegance and expensive items for sale reminded me so much of the French Officers Club in Phnom Penh in Cambodia. There as I think I mentioned earlier you could order bottles of wine for as much as $1,000. I suppose both buildings reflected the apogee of French colonial influence and catered for very much the same levels of French administrators and officers. They certainly must have looked after themselves well. The French are long gone but the Metropole continues to thrive!

The second place of interest for me is the Temple of Literature. This landmark was founded in 1070 as a Confucian temple. It is extremely rich in intellectual tradition. It functioned as Vietnam's first university or Imperial Academy and was established within the temple site as a centre to educate Vietnam's bureaucrats, nobles, royalty and other members of the elite. The university functioned for more than 700 years, from 1076 to 1779. Earlier I’ve mentioned the rigorous studies prescribed and the close examination of candidates for the top positions as mandarins; all in accordance with the Confucian philosophy and morality.

The Temple of Literature is a unique campus although not quite a modern university for the reason that it provided instruction in Confucian theory of administration and social organisation rather than in the modern management concepts that we’re all familiar with.
Given the extreme difficulty of the doctoral laureate tests few students passed final examinations. The list of names engraved on the stone stele every year during this period is very small. I was particularly impressed by the stone steles which were about 2 m tall and on which were inscribed the qualifications of the successful candidates. An emperor established the tradition, dating back to 1484, of carving the names of the laureates of the university on stone steles that were placed on top of stone tortoises. The steles exhibited in the Temple of Literature record an overall total of 2,313 candidates graduating as doctoral laureates. I suppose these were an earlier and more enduring precedent for the conventional present-day degree parchment!

Interestingly, my Vietnamese friends in conversation concerning the awards always appeared to imply that it was at PhD level but I think during its heyday between the 11th and 14th century the study and examination process was intended as recognition of a balance between morality and administrative genius. The awarding of PhDs probably came somewhat later.

Nevertheless the award of a PhD parchment when contrasted with the carved stone steles awarded to the successful candidates – just pales. The steles recorded for all posterity the accomplishments of the successful candidate. To put the situation regarding the Temple of Literature into an historical context I suppose it precedes the creation of the earliest European universities in Italy and Paris by somewhere of the order of a hundred years or more. The campus and its lakes have been preserved. Altogether it’s a delightful environment to relax in. The buildings represent a classical Vietnamese architecture and combine robustness and an impressive simplicity.
The third place of interest in the general Hanoi area and to me the most memorable is the **Perfume Pagoda**.

Approaching the Perfumed Pagoda we travelled on flat bottomed dinghies similar to these through strange shaped limestone mountain scenery. My Dutch diplomat friend took the team on one weekend to the Purple Pagoda monastery site some 45 km to the south west of the city. It was fascinating because for us to access the monastery we had to embark on flat bottomed boats which were paddled for about three or 4
km between the nearest access point and the monastery site. We climbed up to the monastery pagodas which are of great significance for Confucian and other Eastern scholars with its Ying and Yang; opposites and attractions and in the overall symmetry. These elements were displayed in ornate goldfish ponds and in the very buildings themselves.

Several monks came and indicated that they would like to hear us read their English school texts to them. We did this to both our and their mutual enjoyment and satisfaction.

I suppose the only discordant note was the realisation that the live dogs displayed and complaining in metal cages were for eating and not perhaps for admiration. My friend had assured me that the practice of eating dog was very much looked down upon by the majority of the Vietnamese. But it continues to be a predilection for a small minority. There is a part of Hanoi which specialises in dog meat restaurants and which the team avoided like the plague.

The Perfume Pagoda derives its name from the scents provided by the many plants growing in the mountains around it. Again, these mountains are very special and look like an inland version of the Halong Bay islands. They are limestone, and they almost rear up out of the flat plains. In order to get there we had to travel for an hour and a half by sampan from the nearest road access point. It is most elegant transport even if it does leave you - temporarily at least - with a stiff back. At the pagoda site a cable car has been installed by an Austrian company. This allowed us to reach the most venerable area, which is a grotto situated about 500 feet above the plain level.

The centre of the Chua Huong complex, the Huong Tich Cave, houses the Inner Temple. The mouth of the cave has the appearance of an open dragon’s mouth with Chinese characters carved in a wall. The characters are translated as “first grade cave of the South World”. The words are attributed by some to a Chinese emperor of early history. Inside the cave there are many statues. There is a large statue of Lord Buddha, as well as one of the lady revered by Buddhists, Quan Am: both made of a green stone. Among the naturally occurring features are
numerous stalactites and stalagmites, some of which are worn smooth from years of rubbing by visitors to the cave.

Legend claims that the cave was discovered over 2000 years ago by a monk meditating in the area, who named the site after a Tibetan mountain where Lord Buddha practiced asceticism. A stele at the current temple dates the building of a terrace, stone steps and Kim Dung shrine to 1686. The many Pagodas that make up the complex are spread out among the limestone hills and tropical forests in the area of Huong Mountain. Over the years some of the structures were damaged and replaced. More recently, damage was done during both the French and the American wars.

There are many practices associated with Chua Huong and its various temples. Some of these are specifically Buddhist while others are animist or part of popular religion in Vietnam. At Huong Tich there are statues of deities but pilgrims come to get blessings from the stalactites and stalagmites, many of which are named and have special purposes. Many childless pilgrims seek fertility from Nui Co (the girl) and Nui Cau (the boy), while others visit stalactites and stalagmites thought to give prosperity.

The guide told us that pilgrims often gather under one particular stalactite, which resembles a breast, to catch drops of water in hopes of being blessed with health from the ‘milk’ of the ‘breast’. Other names of stalactites and stalagmites include the Heap of Coins (Dun Tien), the Gold Tree, the Silver Tree, the Basket of Silkworms (Buong Tam), the Cocoon (Nong Ken) and the Rice Stack (Dun Gao).

It was emphasised to us by our guide that we were lucky that we had missed the main pilgrimage dates when thousands come to pay homage and to seek good luck and happiness in their lives through making donations to the Buddha, but especially to the lady Buddha, who is especially venerated at the lower Pagoda built on the site. While this site was originally established by Chinese Buddhists I was given to understand that over hundreds of
years it has come to reflect Vietnamese religion and culture. Ironically and in contrast the
guide noted that the religion practised in the South of Vietnam is much closer to Chinese
Buddhism. To me between its isolation and its beauty there was more than a touch of
Glendalough about it.

The main pilgrimage season at Chua Huong is during the Huong Pagoda festival, when
hundreds of thousands of pilgrims make their way to Huong Tich cave and the other temples.
The longest lasting festival in Vietnam, it officially begins on February 15th on the lunar
calendar, but the peak in visitors lasts from the middle of January to the middle of March. The
Festival we were advised is seen by some as a good opportunity for young people to find
romance and begin courtships.

Then we followed the pilgrimage trail back down to the main Pagoda complex. It was
exciting to smell the perfume as we passed down through the jungle. Occasionally, we
encountered pilgrims climbing slowly on their way up to the grotto.

In contrast to the revered grotto and its frolics the monks’ enclosure at the entrance was a
wonderful insight into the way that Buddhism is lived. It was interesting to listen to the guide
explain the significance of ancestor worship, which is part of the Buddhist philosophy. It is
very important that on death the appropriate rituals are followed. The food and money are
placed inside the coffin. The money is not real money, but false money and we passed a
pagoda on one occasion where we saw huge flames coming from where a vast amount of this
false paper money was being burned. The corpse is buried and is believed for a three-year
period to live with the family. Every family has an altar in the house dedicated to the
ancestors. After three years, the body is dug up, and the bones are taken and cremated. Then
they are placed in an ossuary. There they are regularly venerated by the family.

Following cremation of the bones the spirit of the dead person is considered to have made a
full assumption up to heaven or to the Buddhist equivalent, Nirvana. The family pray to the
ancestors for happiness and good luck in their own lives. This is a very important part of the
religion as practiced right across Vietnam and indeed across the border in China.

We in the West have always considered that in countries such as Vietnam and China where
Communism has been established there has been the death or annihilation of religion and the
age-old traditions associated with it. This assumption, based on the pilgrims we came across,
seems to be very far from the reality. Although it was not the pilgrimage season our guide
pointed out to us on a number of occasions pilgrims arriving as a family and bringing with
them donations of food and the paper money for presentation to the monks. The vast majority
were Vietnamese, but he pointed out Chinese amongst them. It reminded me of the Irish
pilgrims visiting Knock or what I suppose I might expect to see at Fatima.
The Perfume Pagoda: the impressive entrance to the 14th century monks’ enclosure.

Vietnam: Perfumed Pagoda approximately 60km outside Hanoi.
The Perfume Pagoda: the inner courtyard and temple with Buddha venerated by the monks.

The Perfume Pagoda: another detail of the monks’ dwellings and the water gardens.
Sailing on a Chinese Junk on Halong Bay

Anyone who has an interest in Vietnam knows of Halong Bay and its two or three thousand islands. It’s situated in the North-East of Vietnam and is a bay in the Gulf of Tonkin. Ha Long Bay, which literally means ‘Descending Dragon Bay’ is a UNESCO World Heritage site located in Quảng Ninh province, Vietnam. The bay contains thousands of limestone karsts and isles in various sizes and shapes. Ha Long Bay is a centre of a larger zone which includes Bái Tử Long bay to the northeast, and Cát Bà islands to the southwest. These larger zones share similar geological, geographical, geo-morphological, climate and cultural characters.

The core of the bay has an area of 334 km² with a high density of 775 islets. The limestone in this bay I read somewhere has gone through 500 million years of formation in different conditions and environments. The evolution of the karst has taken 20 million years under the impact of the tropical wet climate. The diversity of the environment, climate, geology, geography, and geomorphology in the area has created biodiversity, including a tropical evergreen bio-system as well as an oceanic and sea shore bio-system. Ha Long Bay is home to 14 endemic floral species and 60 endemic faunal species. Historical research surveys apparently have shown the presence of prehistoric human beings in this area tens of thousands years ago.

Travelling through the islands by Chinese Junk was a new experience of boat design. I liked it very much and wondered whether I could introduce them into Dun Laoghaire Harbour.

The Bay was the setting for local naval battles against Vietnam's coastal neighbours. On three occasions in the labyrinth of channels in Bach Dang River near the islands the Vietnamese army stopped the Chinese from landing. In 1288 General Tran Hung Dao stopped Mongol ships from invading Vietnam. Much more recently during the Vietnam War, many of the
channels between the islands were heavily mined by the US Navy, some of which are said to still pose a threat to shipping.

We joined a junk equipped with six passenger cabins and with total accommodation for twelve tourists. We boarded it from a jetty in the Halang Port and were the last to arrive after a long and demanding drive from Hanoi. The junk cast off as we went below to the cabins to stow away our gear.

The junk was about twenty metres long and with a beam of about eight metres. There were two decks; one where the cabins were. The upper deck comprised the kitchens, the dining area and the observation deck forward. The steering area was just forward of the dining area so we could see the crew at the wheel. There was no hint of GPS or depth gauges to be seen but there was an impressive brass binnacle and magnetic compass. There were two masts but I wouldn’t think she ever carried sail. We travelled at about a stately five knots through the channels and between the vertical cliffs of the islands. Halang Bay is protected from the Pacific by the large Chinese island of Hainan to the east and by the multitude of islands which combine to shelter it. It’s rarely rough although on occasion and like the rest of Vietnam they can have typhoons coming in off the Pacific.

Our fellow passengers were an interesting group. With us we had a retired French Army officer of seventy six and his younger Algerian doctor colleague. Over several glasses of wine he described his arrival by train from Lhasa in Tibet and via several of the Chinese coastal cities. He had revisited China after a period of fifteen years and was both startled and amazed at the progress he had seen. The highlight for him was the number of electric cars and tuck-tucks he had seen on the streets of Shanghai.

There were two Australian couples. One couple was very concerned at the way the Roman Catholic Church was going downhill so rapidly in Australia. Apparently paedophile priests are not just confined to Ireland. The other couple had come from Laos and complained loudly at how the drug-fuelled lifestyles and sexual antics of the backpackers were eroding local Laotian culture. I confess it was wonderful to sit out with a glass or two of wine after eating a delicious seafood meal and to discuss the world and our differing but colourful impressions with a group of total but agreeable strangers. They were all happy and satisfied retirees and I was hesitant to mention that I had actually been to Vietnam on a working mission.

Several of the islands are hollow, with enormous caves. French tourists visited in the late 19th century, and named one of them *Grotte des Merveilles*. Its three large chambers contain large numbers of stalactites and stalagmites (as well as 19th century French graffiti). Some of the islands support floating villages of fishermen who ply the shallow waters for 200 species of fish and 450 different kinds of molluscs. Many of the islands have acquired their names as a result of interpretation of their unusual shapes: such names include Voi Islet (elephant), Ga Choi Islet (fighting cock), and Mai Nha Islet (roof). My guidebook advises that 989 of the islands have been given names. Birds and animals including bantams, antelopes, monkeys, and lizards live on some of them.
I took this picture of Chinese junks like ours tied up to allow the tourists to climb up to the huge grottos inside one of the islands of Halong Bay.

We stopped and anchored off the various fabulous tourist sites and then were taken ashore by launch. After such visits we had the alternative of either going kayaking or swimming off the beaches. One beach, a delightful place, had been named after Marshall Tito of Yugoslavia by his host, President Ho Chi Minh. That must have been an interesting conversation between the two of them. Writing these lines I’m brought back to the magical environment we passed through; travelling at a gentle pace in an easy swell and endlessly speculating on how these remarkably shaped mountains had been created – and over how long. Ha Long Bay was first listed as a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1994, in recognition of its outstanding aesthetic value. In 2000 the World Heritage Committee additionally recognised Ha Long Bay for its outstanding geological and geo-morphological value.

We spent a further time on Cat Ba Island which is, at 87 square miles, the largest island in the bay. Approximately half of the island's area is covered by a national park - a UN Biosphere Reserve--which is home to the highly endangered Cat Ba langur, a beautiful long-tailed golden haired lemur. This golden-headed langur is rarely seen, as fewer than 100 specimens are thought to survive in the wild, although it was constantly impressed on us that it is the subject of a well-organized conservation programme. They had been hunted down by the islanders both for food and for the Chinese medicinal properties they are supposed to have. I remember that other mammals in the park included civet cats and oriental giant squirrels. The park faces the constant challenge of protecting its biodiversity while encouraging tourism.

Cat Ba Island was pleasant but a little bland after our experiences in Halong Bay. The highlight again was to be taken out for a picnic on a smaller junk as the only guests and with our guide to glide slowly through a maze of smaller islands.
What a good way to spend the end of the day at peace in your coracle waiting for the fish to bite and with the family behind on the floating village waiting to cook the evening meal!

Then the ship’s cook presented us with another marvellous fish and shrimp lunch and beer while the owner of the boat who spoke excellent English entertained us with his views on Vietnamese life and his earlier time spent as an economic migrant traversing the world from Hong Kong to London. He certainly gave us to understand that he was a happy man to be back home with his boat and earning his living on these beautiful waters.