

## Here and now for 6 months

On New Year's Eve 2017 at 12.40 the plane from Gothenburg took off towards Auckland. Mia had taken a leave from school and I realized that life goes on even if I take a rest from my business for a while. So, we decided to create space for new, other experiences different from our "everyday life".

Yes, we are privileged. We can prioritize such an adventure by renting out our house, using our savings and yes, we dare to let go. We realize that we only live once, or...?

Here's a little background to our story. Mia and I met in Sydney in 1985, when we were both "backpackers". We had time for some more trips before we became parents, got our educations and started working. We had a dream that we one day would make such a trip again! So, 33 years later it has become reality. The children are big enough to fend for themselves and we understand that we are not indispensable. With those previous experiences we kind of knew what we were up for.

One of the most important aspects was that we gifted ourselves great freedom. We had no fixed plans apart from our one-way ticket to Auckland, New Zealand. Flip-flops for 6 months and freedom to stay, move on or change plans – open space. Many years ago, I discovered and started to live more in tune with the approach of Open Space Technology. So, I added it to my backpack. More about this at the end of this story.



In **New Zealand** we spent a month traveling around the south island with a rental car, mostly living in local homes booked via Airbnb. What breathtaking nature there is in NZ! Here is where I took a morning swim in Charleston – a forgotten former gold-mining town that was even once intended as the capital of New Zealand. Nowadays it is a tiny village. So tiny it can have the same text on both sides of the welcome sign (joke). Sometimes things don't work out as intended.

Next stop **Australia** where we spent a couple of weeks of rest and pleasant socializing with Mia's twin sister Pia and family in Melbourne. Here you see the famous beach houses in Brighton. Some of the days it was almost 40 degrees C. We found shelter in the shade at their pool.



February 12, we flew to Phnom Penh, **Cambodia**. A huge metropolis without traffic lights! How to cross a multi-lane road with crazy traffic? Keep walking without stopping and space opens for you! If you stop, you are in trouble, because no one can predict when you will start walking again – dangerous! This is about practicing trust! We clinged on to the locals before we dared on our own.

We traveled through Cambodia for four weeks. We visited museums showing how the Khmer Rouge terrorized its citizens during the second half of the 70's. 3 million "suspected dissidents" were killed, out of a population of 8 million, unbelievable.

We visited the ancient city of Angkor which between 800-1400 's was one of the world's largest cities. It was abandoned and rediscovered in the 19th century. Today some of the temples are restored/recreated while others have only been made available but preserved in the condition they were found, partly integrated in the jungle. According to Wikipedia, there are 72 major ruins in the area. Many are huge. The Temple of Angkor Wat is almost 1 km long!



We also tried out Cambodian health care, which is not among the more prominent ones in the world. While walking across a suspension bridge it broke and Mia fell halfway through. She got a nasty wound on the shin. A bit panicked I cried out for an ambulance and I got the answer: "We have no ambulances!" Well we had no choice but to go with a tuk-tuk for one hour. After 7 stitches and supervision for 10 days we could move on.

We passed the border into **Vietnam** in the south. Our first stop was Ho Chi Minh City (Saigon) – a vibrant metropolis with millions of mopeds/scooters who own the streets. Vietnam with nearly 100 million inhabitants has evolved tremendously in recent decades. We had six exciting weeks of experiences in the country. We were reminded of the terrible Vietnam war (1955-75) in museums and memorials. Sweden's support in the reconstruction is not forgotten and the Bai Bang Project (Mill) that was criticized heavily at the time has proved to be of great importance and still is today.



Slowly, we traveled north in the oblong shaped country. We stayed in small hotels often owned by a family that also lived in the place. They act like a travel agency as well, so they offer to book bus tickets, arrange excursions etc. It makes travelling simple and comfortable. The food was consistently good and inexpensive, a noodle soup with chicken could cost half a dollar at a small local restaurant. A large beer was about the same price. Overnight stays cost us normally 5-10 USD for a good double room. In the south it was hot (30-35 degrees C) so we made sure to find a place with a swimming pool.

We made several bus, train and boat trips, hikes, scooter excursions (superb way to get around), cave adventures in Phong Nha and many encounters with friendly people both Vietnamese and other travelers. North of Hanoi, at the border with China, we stayed with minority people and made hikes in the mountains.

The capital Hanoi is another one in our collection of "crazy cities". For a person from Kungsbacka it is a completely different world when more than 10 million people manage to live together in one city. The most fascinating thing is that it works!

We were tired from many and long bus trips, so we flew from Hanoi to Luang Prabang, **Laos**. The heat made us decide to only stay a couple of weeks in Laos. We visited Luang Prabang, Vang Vieng and the capital Vientiane where we stayed with a friend/colleague. Mike is committed to organizing how people should handle the fact that the country is full of bombs from the Vietnam War. Training, identification and incapacitation of bombs takes place daily. It is unimaginable that 2 million tons of bombs were dropped here, the world's most bombed country. Mike has also started the museum where the work they are doing is described, including the rehabilitation efforts made. Nr 1 in Vientiane, on the site TripAdvisor!

In Vang Vieng we were privileged to visit a newly established elephant sanctuary, where elephants are rescued from hard work and mismanagement. Maybe not so smart to bathe with the elephants in 30-degree warm mud and then wash it off in a muddy warm lake, but it was irresistible.



Our next destination was **Indonesia**, the world's largest Muslim country, with 250 million inhabitants. It is also a country where people of different faiths live together. There are hundreds of traditional dishes from all different regions and almost the same number of languages. Most people speak Bahasa Indonesia, which was created as a common language.

We spent six weeks here, started off in Jakarta, another multimillion person city that makes a Swede confused. Jakarta is located on the Island Java, which is predominantly Muslim. There we visited the poorest people, who live in shanty towns along the railway tracks. A big, difficult and hopeless experience. At the same time hopeful, because amid all misery, a burning life spark often also appears here.

We continued with many hours of bus travel through the island of Flores including several dives at the Komodo Islands. In Flores most people are Christians/Catholics, but the traditional animistic faith is usually even stronger/clearer in practice. But as they said, "We must choose a religion by law". Animism is not regarded as a religion, by authorities. We got a fascinating insight into how they live in harmony with nature and spirits/ancestors.

The last Two weeks we spent on and around Bali which is a lot more than Kuta beach! Here I had the privilege to take part in a full day ceremony/staff day at the resort where we stayed, up in the northwest. All employees joined and some other family members including children. I experienced Hindu rituals at three different temples, in scorching heat. After that it was time for storytelling by the pool before it transformed to a party into the night!

The purpose of the ceremonies was to give thanks for successes and to start focusing on new goals. Hindus, at least in Bali, show a tremendous amount of gratitude in everyday life. People make offerings both outside the house, in the temple of the neighborhood block as well as the city temple.



## Some summarizing impressions.

It was an “**active holiday**”, with complete freedom. When we arrived in a new country, we tried to learn some basic phrases. It makes a big difference! We read about the country and the place where we were. Also, we slowly started to think about the next destination and a possible route we wanted to take further. Our main sources were guide books from Lonely Planet, TripAdvisor, Google and by talking to other travelers and locals. Usually we stayed 3-5 days in one place, sometimes longer and sometime shorter. We used Internet to book accommodation when we knew where to go (booking.com, hotels.com, Airbnb). When we needed to rest or when we had a great time, then we just, stayed longer.

We **never felt insecure**, threatened or scared. Well, when we arrived in Phnom Penh it did feel a bit scary before we relaxed. The tempo of these big, noisy, pulsating cities was a little much for us because we haven't experienced it for many years. Well, I come to think of one more occasion when we were afraid. In Nelson, NZ, we felt threatened by a dog that appeared very strange. The dogs in Asia were kind 😊.

We lived and travelled **simple but good**. We needed to keep an eye on our budget but could treat ourselves a little more than when on a very tight budget. We often managed to find a place with a pool or beach, which was nice in the heat in Cambodia, Southern Vietnam, Laos and Indonesia. Getting up into the higher altitudes was a relief from the heat sometimes.

Finally, I'm a big "fan" of Open Space Technology and its **four principles and one law**. To have this as part of my approach makes life easier, also on this kind of journey! It helps me to be here and now more often and to make the choices that are right for me.

- Whoever comes is the right people. (Accept what is, the ones that I share the dormitory with or the driver we have is absolutely right.)
- Whenever it starts is the right time. (It simply starts when it starts, neither before nor after!)
- Whatever happens is the only thing that could happen. (We do our best, then what happens happens.)
- When it is over, it is over. (I am aware of the possibility to end if I feel complete.)

The law of two feet. (I am responsible for where I put my energy. If I do not get anything out of it, I can choose to do something about it, for example go elsewhere. Or I can choose to stay and suffer.)

If you want to see more pictures with narrative text you can go to my Facebook profile and find the two albums I've uploaded. There are almost 2000 pictures/stories from the trip!

<https://www.facebook.com/thomas.herrmann1>

