

Dear friends,

About 300 KM away – a 5 hour van ride and half an hour by a motor boat up-river and then a long walk uphill in high humidity later we reached the longhouse. Yes, it was basic – we slept on a mattress on the floor with other members of the community separated by a curtain for privacy. The toilet facilities were outside and you had to fight for space in them with various buggy, flying, creepy-crawly things (no small thing for someone as squeamish as me!). I admit to being a little anxious (understatement) but the welcome we received from these people was amazing. They share everything so the gifts we took there of biscuits and cakes were shared amongst everyone, and the headman (Every longhouse has one) officially welcomed us with rice wine. Actually that communal welcome was after a more intimate one with me, Louise, Paul (our guide) and a couple of other men treating us to their special distilled rice wine. The head man, quite friendly but forceful and a bit intimidating started by giving me and himself a shot of this stuff and told me I had to down it in one. Well, as you know, I like a wine or two (or three) but I am not used to spirits. I tried my best after 1,2,3.....but I managed it in two glugs. Then he immediately filled it up again and told me to go again. A smile was never far from his face but this time he said “Luba luba” which means slowly slowly. He chain smoked (At some point I thought Louise was going to give him a lecture about the perils of smoking). There were no-smoking signs in the hut of course but I suppose he’s the head honcho so he can do what he likes! Good ness knows how much we drank that night – this happened on our second night. The company had to request this because people were getting too drunk for the activities the next day.

And what a day it was. We started on a trail through the forest headed by two men with machetes. They are all very sure footed – Louise and I was always frightened of slipping on a tree root or something on the up-and-down trail. Once we’d walked a while we were met at a jetty in the forest with a couple of others from the longhouse with supplies and we were in the boat for 1 and a quarter hours to a spot miles from anywhere and up a steep bankside (they had to help us both up – goodness knows what they think of us feeble and unsteady westerners) and we had a Barbeque over a log fire of sticky rice, chicken, aubergine, pumpkin and a beautiful sauce of soy sauce with chillies (everything here has chillies in it) garlic and Lime – all cooked in Bamboo. They only spoke a few words of English but their actions said far more than words could ever do. I’m so glad they didn’t allow us to get too drunk to partake of this experience by delaying our welcome to our second night. Me and my prissy urbanised ways was quite anxious as I say. There was no-where to have a shave so I ended this two-day adventure full of stubble and my calves full of mosquito bites, but it was well worth it. It was an experience I’ll never forget. Such lovely people who don’t have much, farm everything they need themselves and use the forest as their larder.

After a gruelling journey back to Kuching in reverse order our hotel upgraded us to a lovely spacious room. I’m learning that there is nothing quite like a shave and a hot shower after these adventures. The native longhouse inhabitants have many advantages to their lives and I admire them tremendously but give me a comfortable room, running water and good sanitation, a choice of restaurants and a good glass of wine anytime – you learn a lot about yourself on these trips!

Speaking of roughing it, after this one night in a comfortable hotel we catch a flight tomorrow to another (accessible only by air) area where the Mulu caves are situated. These are (I think) the largest caves in the world and we'll be staying in a National park with again, pretty basic facilities. Again, we'll be living out of our rucksacks, leaving our cases stored at the hotel. Do you know, I think I'm getting used to it.

We visited four of these fantastic and huge caves by walkway and boat, each one different. At the end of the first day we waited for the magnificent spectacle of millions of bats leaving "Deer cave" in wonderful spiralling formations. It was a sight that lasted for twenty minutes – we are so fortunate to be able to witness these things.

"Nelson" our guide, was a native tribesman who had converted to Christianity but indigenous beliefs co-exist side by side. He related a story when they were building the walkways inside the caves for tourists and they were encountering all kinds of problems. They put that down to the spirit belonging to a skull they'd found on site. Nelson told us that his grandfather was asked to perform a kind of exorcism by sacrificing a pure white chicken in the cave – no more problems after that.

Half an hour before the flight back to Kuching we were the only people in the departure lounge – quite an eerie experience, then two more people turned up – the entire flight for just four people! Anyway, we reached Kuching and are now ensconced in our final hotel before we leave for India on Thursday – and the next step of our adventure. The hotel have upgraded us and it is superb. We have a mangrove facing room. We are warned not to swim in the sea because of salt-water crocodiles in the area – so...we probably won't try it.

Spiritually, I am still immersed in Buddhist scriptures. One thing I have learned is that according to a Tibetan theologian, Buddhism is based mainly on the theory of "Dependent Origination". This means simply (ha ha) that all things are the result of cause and effect – we are dependent on what came before us. Ergo, we have no separate "self" – only a derivative self from which we came. Selfhood is an illusion and we are all part of the whole (All is Brahma to borrow a Hindu concept.) We are emanations of the whole universe. (Keep up – I'll be asking questions later!). I was just thinking that this was quite different from Christianity when I remembered that St. Paul writes somewhere "it is not I who live but Christ who lives in me" as if Paul doesn't have an independent existence of his own – hmmm – makes you think.

Another few essays talk about Buddhist consecration of statues and stupas (Pagodas in China). That was very interesting. There are hugely elaborate rituals for consecrating statues, artefacts and stupas (which generally hold relics). The result of such consecrations is that a statue of Buddha becomes not just a facsimile of Buddha but actually becomes the "real presence" of Buddha and there are many stories of Statues talking to worshippers. This, inevitably put in mind our own "consecrations" - making things Holy for god's use – and of course mainly the Eucharistic prayer we use at every Eucharist. In the "catholic" understanding. the bread and wine become not just memorials

to Christ but his “real presence” in the Buddhist sense. Of course, we do say “Do this in remembrance of me” over the elements but the word “remembrance” in the original Greek is “anamnesis” which carries a much stronger meaning than simply remembering and carries the meaning of “making present”. So there is quite an overlap between Buddhist meaning and Christian ones which I hadn’t anticipated.

Kayaking today. I really don’t remember booking this! A 10K paddle in a two man canoe in a river in a rain forest. My huge concern apart from snakes and rapids was capsizing. Louise and I negotiated the rapids OK apart from nearly getting grounded on rocks and coming out backwards but we capsized three times(!) albeit a little less frightening every time. Our native guide was a real joker but he earned his crust keep helping us both back into the canoe. One special moment happened when we stopped on the bank was feeding the hundreds and silver foil carp swirling around our legs in a frenzy. They felt really odd brushing up against your skin but it’s a day I won’t forget.

Now a day of rest before flying to India!

Note: There will be no communication next week because we are staying in an ashram (Religious community) in the wilds of Tamil Nadu all week. Another stint with just bare essentials I’m sure – but I’m also sure it’ll be worth it.

The Prayer for Today is going to be the same one I’ll be using throughout my Sabbatical which we read every day – the Jewish Traveller’s Prayer.

**May the God who called our Father Abraham
To journey into the unknown,
And guarded him and blessed him,
Protect me too and bless my journey.
May his confidence support me as I set out,
May his spirit be with me on the way,
And may he lead me back to my home in peace.
Those I love I commend to his care.
He is with them, I shall not fear.
As for myself,
May his presence be my companion,
So that blessing may come to me
And to everyone I meet.
Blessed are you Lord
Whose presence travels with his people.**

Love and Prayers,
Martin