

travellers' tales

WE'RE ALWAYS INTERESTED to hear about your travels, whether it's a return trip to a country you love, great moments captured on camera, or the smaller things that help make an enjoyable trip. The next six pages showcase some of the fantastic travel tales and photographs you've shared with us this Spring. From family adventures in the Masai Mara, to exploring Vietnam, to a private tea ceremony in Kyoto; we hope you will enjoy reading them as much as we did.

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Christmas in the Masai Mara

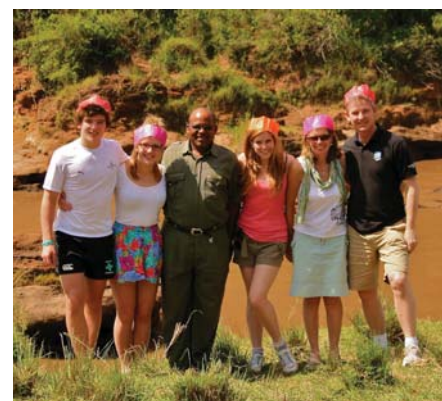
Like so many other families hoping to get away over the festive season, our plans for a dream holiday over Christmas and New Year looked increasingly under threat as the snow and icy weather paralysed the UK's transport network. Seemingly against the odds, our flight to Kenya departed on time from Heathrow on 21st December and so began our family adventure.

Within 24 hours we were enjoying our first taste of safari in the magical Masai Mara. Driving out from the Governor's Camp with our guide and new friend Joseph, we soon met many of the local residents, including lion, leopard, giraffe, elephant and many more. The abundance of wildlife was truly overwhelming.

That first evening was our daughter Fiona's 20th birthday, which was celebrated in memorable style by a group of local dancing Masai warriors, complete with birthday cake! Our first Christmas away from home a few days later would turn out to be just as special. We were treated to carol singing, roast turkey and even Christmas crackers – who needs snow?!

To celebrate a birthday and Christmas far away from home was, not surprisingly, a very different experience, but one that we thoroughly enjoyed. To have spent the time with the wonderfully friendly people of the Governor's Camp among the enchanting wildlife of the Masai Mara made it an experience we shall treasure forever.

Ian McCurdie and his family travelled to Kenya and Zanzibar with Audley in December 2010.



Christmas Day in the Mara



Cheetah on an anthill, Masai Mara

The Real Vietnam

Over the years we have travelled extensively in the Far East, visiting several countries in the region, seeing superb locations, people and generally having a great time.

The holiday we put together with Lyn was to be a different experience; we had grown away from the more popular tourist locations over the past few years and wanted to see the real country, the people and their cultures. The visit to Ha Giang province was an idea we nurtured for a couple of years and October 2010 was crunch time after meticulous planning.

Arriving in Hanoi felt great, we had been here once before so the city was familiar. The next evening we boarded the overnight train to Lao Cai with our guide, who was to be with us now for the duration; little did we know at this point how valuable he would become.



Local home

We spent a couple of days in Sapa before the real experience began and what an enthralling next eight days it was, seeing the wonderful colourful minority tribes, breathtaking scenery and cultures that had not changed from one generation to the next.

The rice terraces, which tumble down the mountainsides, were an array of wonderful greens and yellows as the harvest season was just starting. We walked through these terraces seeing close up how people gather the crop by hand in a centuries old tradition, being invited into their homes, sharing a cup of tea or rice wine with them as they made us most welcome; memories that will last forever.

Experiencing the different markets en route was another fantastic insight into the daily life of these minority tribes, the colours all around were stunning, from the fresh vegetables to the tribal costumes, it was a rich feast for the eyes wherever you looked.

People talk about a high point of their holidays; these eight days in Ha Giang were eight high points as every day was a new and enthralling experience.

We negotiated minor landslides; visited schools, villages, rice terraces, people's homes and markets; drank tea, rice and corn wine and all this was possible because of our guide's knowledge and the fact that he had access to places you wouldn't normally visit.



Winnowing rice

He wanted to show us the best of his country and particularly Ha Giang province with everything it had to offer. We think he succeeded in more ways than one.

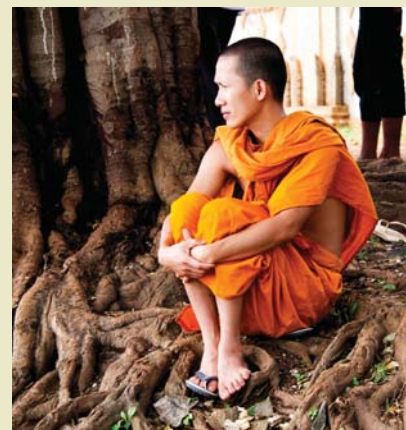
This trip had class written all over it, from planning the holiday with Audley, to the guide and support on the ground. Put simply Ha Giang was the hidden Vietnam uncovered and eight stunning days.

Les and Lorraine Forrester travelled to northern Vietnam with Audley in October 2010.

Happy-go-lucky Cambodia

We stayed in Phnom Penh and Siem Reap and went to all the well known sites and temples. But we were particularly overwhelmed by the people of Cambodia. As you can see from the boy on the bike, 'health and safety' is not a major issue yet. While the boy waves his father is on his mobile phone and his crash helmet is in the bike basket! Wonderful country.

Nick Steidl travelled to Cambodia with Audley in November 2010.



Culture in Kyoto

October 2010 saw my husband and I depart for our long planned, three week unaccompanied trip to Japan. As the departure date loomed, I began to get 'cold feet'. As people of more mature years, would we cope with the extensive travel, the food, the language? The arrival of Audley's final itinerary pack reassured us. Whoever thought of this idea had obviously travelled extensively and knew what visitors needed.

We were met at Narita Airport by a charming man who organised the hire of a mobile phone and our travel tickets before we caught the bus to our hotel.

We spent several days in Tokyo before moving on to Miyajima Island which we loved. Kyoto was a love/hate relationship. We loved the city but hated the transport system and resorted to taxis to get around. This was in part due to the fact that I do not walk as well as I did. Our next stop was Kanazawa, a very pleasant city before we caught the bus to Shirakawa-go which we enjoyed. Our next stop was Takayama, where we caught the bus to Matsumoto travelling over the mountains and our final stop at Yudanaka. The mountain bus ride would have been very dramatic if the weather had been better!



Private tea ceremony



View from Mount Misen, Miyajima Island

We stayed in modern hotels, one huge, others of modest size, and three ryokans (traditional Japanese inns). We enjoyed the ryokan experience and I would recommend visitors to try the public baths in them.

We ate western breakfasts but had Japanese dinners. A lot of fish was served which we enjoyed. We also had a Bento box whilst travelling and ate in smaller, funky restaurants and a department store.

Language proved to be less of an issue than we feared – many train announcements are in English as well as many written notices and guides. Even when Japanese people spoke no English they were charming and went out of their way to help.

What were our most memorable experiences? Miyajima, some of the gardens we saw even though the Autumn colours were late, the snow monkeys and our two cultural experiences in Kyoto.

We had arranged through Ben at Audley, to have a private tea ceremony and a kimono wearing session via the Women's Association of Kyoto. On each occasion we were collected from our hotel by an attendant and taken by taxi to our host's home. We had the privilege

of seeing two private homes and of having conversations with four cultured, English speaking ladies. We each had the opportunity of preparing tea for each other whilst the formalities of the ceremony were explained.

For the kimono wearing session our host showed us around her home telling us her family had lived on the same land for seventeen generations and had previously been responsible for safety in that area of Kyoto. She explained various symbolic features of the house and garden, saying some of the stones had been in the same place for over 200 years. We were then dressed – my husband in formal Shogun costume and I as a princess.

We would recommend visitors to Japan to take the opportunity to visit and participate in at least one of these experiences. We thoroughly enjoyed this trip and the high level of planning which Audley had put into it was evident.

Jackie and Christopher Searl travelled to Japan with Audley in October 2010.

If you would like to donate to the Japan Tsunami Appeal, please visit the British Red Cross website: www.redcross.org.uk

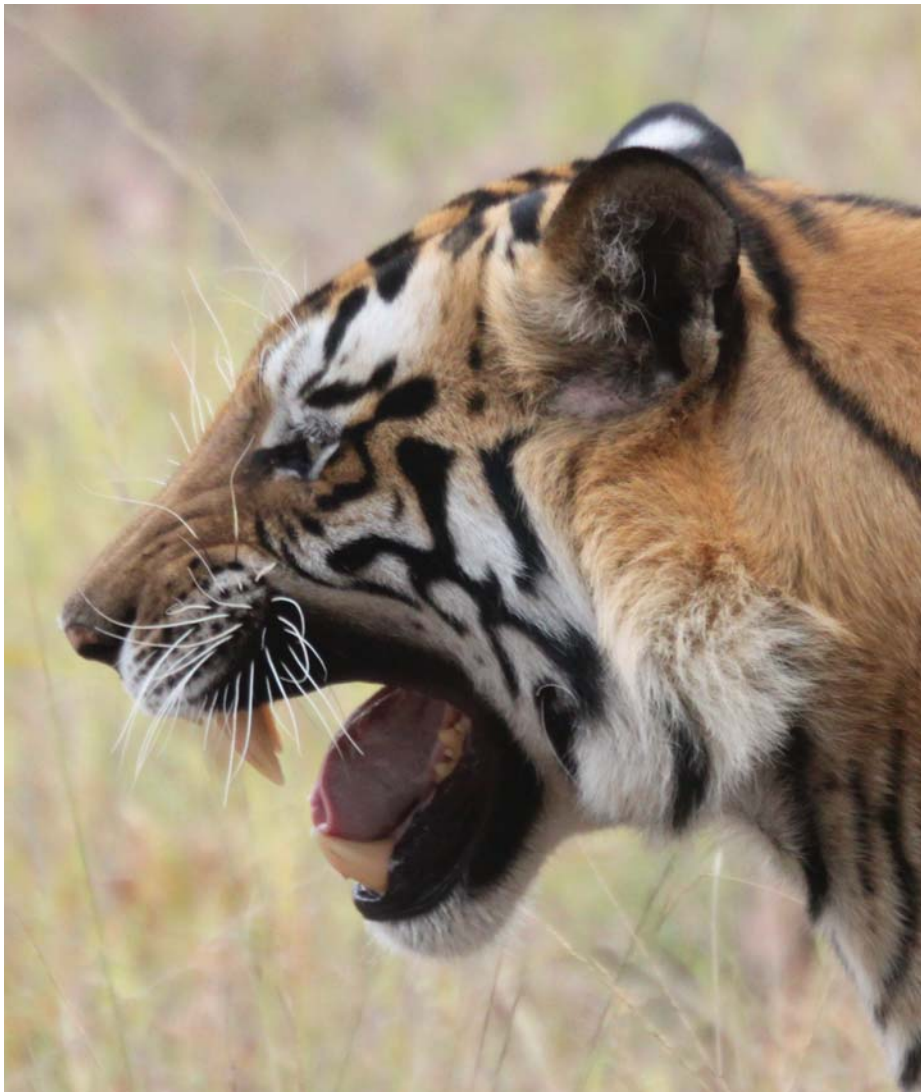
Tiger Spotting in India

Katherine and Philip Cropper travelled to India with Audley in March 2010. They were lucky enough to see several tigers in Bandhavgarh and managed to take these striking photographs.

WEB *plus*

You can watch a video about tiger spotting on our website.

www.audley.co.uk/traveller/spring2011



Reaching out in Nepal



SOS Children's Village, Chhorepatan

After taking numerous aerial photographs of the Himalayas, the ground mist cleared enough for us to land at Kathmandu. Nepal more than exceeded our expectations. Our guide was more than willing to help in carrying bags filled with 246 pairs of assorted socks to the ROKPA orphanage in Boudhanath. We were shown round the orphanage and introduced to some of the children. Little did we think we would ride the streets of Kathmandu on cycle rickshaws.

Pokhara is somewhat different to Kathmandu. Views are stupendous and the whole atmosphere is much more relaxed. Our guide, who now is almost part of the family, gave us a great trip round the sights, finishing at SOS Children's Village at Chhorepatan to visit Tensin, a little boy whom we sponsor. It was a wonderful visit meeting his house mother and friends. Our guide has already been back to see him and has promised to continue visiting and to keep us up to date. Then to Tiger Mountain Lodge – heaven on earth. Wonderful holiday; faultless organisation. Thank you Audley.

Pauline and Kenneth Mason travelled to Nepal with Audley in October 2010.



Preparing for the boat races, Phnom Penh

Magical Cambodia

When our family and friends heard that we were going to visit Hong Kong and Cambodia, the most frequently asked question seemed to be “why”? The visit to Hong Kong could easily be explained. It was to be a trip down memory lane, as we had lived there in the early seventies. But Cambodia? In most people’s minds, the links with its relatively recent infamous past – Pol Pot and the Khmer Rouge – would not at first make it seem an attractive travel destination of any great interest. We too were not entirely sure what we were letting ourselves in for but we put ourselves into a very safe pair of hands in the shape of Mark Hotham, our Audley travel specialist. After talking with Mark at length, he was able to get a feel for the type of trip that would suit us, giving maximum destinations and experiences, but without the itinerary being exhaustingly relentless.

Hong Kong reignited our love for Southeast Asia. We had three wonderful days there, revisiting some places where we once lived, and experiencing a whole new Hong Kong, including getting around on the extremely efficient MTR (Mass Transit Railway) which was only just being built when we lived there.

We purchased an Octopus Card for this, and it also gave easy access to the iconic Peak Railway, and the Sky Viewing Station at the top of the Peak too.

We stayed at the ideally located Langham Hotel on Kowloon side, only a stone’s throw from another feature from earlier times, the iconic Star Ferry. We were also able to use our Octopus card for this short trip across the harbour. Whilst staying at the Langham, we celebrated our return to Hong Kong with an indulgent but memorable dinner in their Michelin starred T’ang Court Restaurant. A short walk from the Langham hotel took us to the unexpected delights of Kowloon Park. A very restful, yet quite contemporary landscaped park in the middle of this vibrant area of Kowloon.

After only two and a half hours flying time to Phnom Penh, we arrived in Cambodia at the end of the wet season (November) where the temperatures were anywhere between a welcome 28 and 32 degrees centigrade. This made sightseeing and walking around pretty comfortable. In addition, one main reason for our visit there at that particular time of the

year was to be able to experience the water festivals. These take place when the various rivers are full to capacity after the rains, and many teams from all over Cambodia compete in boat races – the boats we saw in Phnom Penh had upwards of 60 crew members rowing for pride. It was an incredible sight.

And what of our time in Cambodia? I could tell you about the stunningly beautiful Royal Palace, the intriguing Silver Palace, and several of the capital’s other main sites by being pedalled around the city on a cyclotour. It will be an experience we will never forget. We felt a compelling obligation to visit the Genocide Museum, and the Killing Fields, in order to gain a better understanding of the evil that visited this country. We are so glad we did and in so doing had a rare opportunity to meet one of the survivors of S21, a notorious prison in Phnom Penh. Another unforgettable, though much happier experience, was a visit to the Friends restaurant/school for an unexpectedly good lunch (and great value), which offered an opportunity to see charity truly making a difference to young people’s lives – we felt so inspired that we purchased ‘a notional brick’ – this organisation helps street children make

new lives for themselves. Thank you Audley for raising our awareness of this and similar organisations' valuable work!!

I could tell you about the insightful and very instructive drive from Phnom Penh to our next destination, Siem Reap. Thanks to our brilliant guide Rith (pronounced Ritz) we were able to see and experience so many things which make up every day Cambodian life: the ubiquitous rice fields; being invited to watch a villager threshing the rice stems on his much-cherished threshing machine and covering a bemused nearby water buffalo in the process with the discarded 'straw'; watching a very skilful lady winnowing a large sieve half full of rice, and lastly, the winnowed rice laid out to dry on woven bamboo matting on any available space.

I should also tell you about a boat trip one afternoon on the Tonle Sap Lake, though to call it a lake seems an underestimation in its description because once past the lakeside habitation, it seems you are going out into a vast ocean! The life which goes on along the

"Our heads and hearts are full of the images, sights, sounds, and smells, but perhaps the most lingering image of all is the one of the Cambodian people?"

waters' edge is remarkable, and very humbling, to us in our world of plenty. The houses (also shops, smoke-houses, spirit houses etc), are built on stilts and are made of various recycled materials, each one a testimony to the individuality of its occupants. Some are painted bright colours, others have assorted pot plants on the verandah. Many of the children who lived in the houses and saw us passing by never failed to give a cheery wave and big smiles – though this was a common sight throughout our various excursions in Cambodia. Having already visited the area's magnificent Angkor Wat and Angkor Thom temples, one unexpected delight of our time in the Siem Reap area was a visit to Banteay Srei – the so called Women's Temple. Built of yellow and pinkish-hued sandstone, the carvings were totally exquisite, and a contrast in style from the more imposing Angkor temples. Another water festival was taking place during our visit there, and once again, boats with teams of between twenty to

twenty five members were racing against each other. It was a great day out for locals and tourists alike.

I need to tell you too about the last destination on our itinerary – Kep in the Kampot region. Mark was absolutely right about this gem of a place, that it would be a great place to finish our trip. We stayed at the Veranda Eco-lodge and the view from our own veranda towards the sea was stunning. The area is known for its seafood, especially crabs, and also the Kampot pepper grown on a nearby plantation. So, one lunchtime we naturally had to try a local speciality, crab with fresh green peppercorns. This was served at the Kimly restaurant in Kep – deliciously simple and simply wonderful! That same morning, we had hired a tuk-tuk driver to take us out to the pepper plantation and what a great way of seeing the countryside that was. He also became our 'guide' when we arrived at the plantation, giving us an unofficial tour. This short trip provided us with a couple of great gifts to take back home. The next day the same tuk-tuk driver arranged a short boat trip for us to nearby Rabbit Island – a very pleasant and relaxing way to spend a few hours on a lovely beach setting.

What I would really love to share with readers of this article though, is the magic of Cambodia and its people. Even now, several weeks after returning from our trip, our heads and hearts are full of the images, of the sights, sounds, and smells, but perhaps the most lingering image of all is the one of the



Water buffalo being covered by straw

Cambodian people. Their families and their culture were cruelly shattered in the 1970's, but they are a truly stoical, determined people, rebuilding their lives in inspiring and imaginative ways. They have big hearts, a beguiling sense of humour, a huge willingness to share their love of their country with visitors and for us to enjoy our time there – they do make you very welcome. The guides and drivers provide so much more than a duty to fulfil your itinerary – they can, if allowed, add a richer dimension if you go with an open heart and open mind. I promise you, any trip here will be much the richer for it.

There is so very much more I wanted to add, but it would take up far too much space. Perhaps you need to go for yourself and tap into the magic that is Cambodia.

Valerie and Raymond Gatward travelled to Hong Kong and Cambodia with Audley in November 2010.



Valerie and Raymond in Kep