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Happy Holidays 2008

Special points of interest:

- Singapore has 4.4 million people
- Singapore has a death penalty for drug traffickers
- I celebrated New Years 2008 about 13 hours before most of you
- It costs less than one penny a minute to call the states from Singapore on a cell phone.
- All of the birds in the picture are real. None of them pooped on me!



Thai/Sing Holidays

Greetings to all of my friends and family wherever this news may find you. This issue covers news from December 2007 to the beginning of 2008 as I traveled from Cambodia (home) to

Thailand for a special Christmas and on to Singapore to bring in the New Year.

This was my fifth straight year away from home during the holidays so I had to make it spectacular! And it was.

My family was cuddled around a living room fireplace in Wisconsin. A lot of my friends were busy wrapping presents for their large families (they keep having kids).

I was alone, but not lonely. There is a certain freedom being able to check out a new country/city on your own. I had no itinerary, no plan, no objectives; just a place to stay, a lonely planet guidebook, and some money.

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Tickets in a Heartbeat

So, how many of you bought seasonal plane tickets months ahead of time? Get a load of this story!

Mario and Kathleen were supposed to arrive in Cambodia from Bangkok. I had booked motel rooms at Siem Reap and tentatively looked into plane tickets to KL (Kuala Lumpur) or Singapore—we had a loose idea of Angkor Wat and then on to one of the two places afterward. So anyway, there

are a lot of new restrictions and red tape involved with Visas between Cambodia and Thailand. Don't ask. Not only that, but the National elections were in full swing. Needless to say, I called Mario and Kathleen in Bangkok to finalize some tickets on Dec 22nd. They were due on Dec 21st. They couldn't get visas! So at 4:00 I got a ticket to Bangkok due to leave at 9:00. Amazing. Here it is, a few days before Christmas, and I was purchas-

ing tickets. (don't forget, this is a Buddhist country).

I was all set. I took a nap, had a few beers with Darren and Lucia at my apartment, then jumped into a tuk tuk and got to the airport nice and early.

At the airport bar, I ended up drinking with a few American documentary film directors from—get this—Minneapolis and Milwaukee. We exchanged business cards and planned to keep in touch. Wow. S.W!!!



Happy Holidays 2008

A Relaxing Dive with a Friend



The Safety Stop put on a bountiful buffett for Xmas dinner.

They also provided an Xmas tree so I didn't have to put one up this year!

"I had been to Chumporn many times and I was still waiting to get a glimpse of the bull sharks that LURK there at 30 meters."



Underwater on Christmas Eve, I wanted to wish everyone a Merry Christmas.

I forgot my Santa Hat before I left the boat. Sorry.

I have written about Koh Tao many times before. This was probably one of the most relaxing dives and certainly was the shortest of my dive trips. I only dove two dives!

A little bit of history first: Planet Scuba is operated by my South African friend named Brian Knight. The first few times in Koh Tao, Jimmy Fingers was the course director. Jimmy is an old friend and mentor from my first days of scuba in Honduras. No kidding! Under Jimmy's direction were a handful of instructors that helped me along over a few summers: Bob, Ian, Darren, Barry, Katie, and a few others. Times have changed a bit, but not much. Bob is now the course director. Barry, Darren, and Ian remain as instructors. Brian and his wife still run the business and I just arrive if I want to work or be lazy.



This was certainly a lazy time for me. I wasn't even sure if I wanted to dive. There wasn't much choice. Bob immediately signed me up with him on the boat for a nitrox dive. Now, diving with Bob is like diving with Jimmy Fingers - they are both fish! And Bob's encyclopedic knowledge of diving and photographic memory make every dive a fantastic dive.

The ship was full of divers. While Bob and I were diving without students, Bob is still in charge of the whole operation. I got my gear ready and watched as Bob indirectly oversaw the how the 40 or so people on the boat prepared to dive at one of the best dive spots in Thailand. I turned my vision out to the waves and went over the dive site in my mind. I had been to Chumporn many times and I was still waiting to get a glimpse of the bull sharks that lurk there at 30 meters!

Chumporn is an undersea coral mound that lies off the North West coast of Koh Tao. There are usually no less than a half dozen boats tied off, each dropping off twenty to thirty divers. But this time, the day before Christmas, our boat had planned a late arrival. Just as we were arriving, the other boats were finishing their dives and headed for their second morning dive site. Bob and I were already descending not two minutes after the engine had been shut off. We were going for a maximum time at depth so we wanted to be first in.

Nitrox diving means a diver breathes in a mixture of air that is richer in oxygen and less in nitrogen. Without going into too much detail, it allows a diver to go to a maximum of around 30meters (99ft) for about 45 minutes or so. With regular air, that time is cut down to around 20 minutes. So, with experienced breathing control, your time at a lower depth is much greater with nitrox diving. It gave Bob and me more time in shark territory. The bull sharks stay around 25-30 m deep at this site. They are seen by hundreds of divers every year. But not by me.

Even though Bob got a glimpse of a shark, I was not rewarded! Darn. Too bad. I just had to enjoy the schools of other fish. It is amazing how many different schools are swimming around at all levels here. Micros and Macros are in abundance. I didn't have to worry about Bob and Bob didn't worry about me. The dive was probably just under an hour total. I don't remember. The time just flew by. We stayed well below the other divers and just enjoyed a relaxing pace. He doesn't like swimming any more than I do.

The most important part of the operation was everyone got back on the boat. The divers came up happy, the instructors were ensuring divers were safe, and everyone seemed to be having fun. The sun was out, the weather was in the 90's, and was very relaxed. I love diving.

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Twas the Night Before Christmas

Christmas Eve on the Island is crazy. There are so many parties on the beach that the bars just flow into each other. There is little concept of time when the sun goes down. The fact is, most of the dive operators close on Christmas Day. With no diving in the morning, that means all of the dive instructors, DMs, and boat captains are drunk or on some kind of psychedelic drug.

Mario hosted a small dinner for a couple of the instructors from Planet Scuba. He was celebrating

being back with Kathleen again and being with good friends during the holidays. That is so true.

I was very happy to be with the Koh Tao family again. I have been going to Koh Tao for about three years now, off and on. It is truly a "family" atmosphere at Planet Scuba.

So after a "Jungle" dinner at Robert's restaurant - Robert claims to be French, but Mario and I don't believe him. We think he is Moroccan or something- most of us took a short break or even a

nap to prepare for the evening. We all knew it would be a long evening of partying on the beach.

And so it was. Along almost two miles of beach, there were crowds of inebriated people from all over the world. The atmosphere was a lot like I would imagine Mardi Gras is like: scantily clad people, fire jugglers, loud music, alcohol and drugs openly shared, high school coeds barely able to stand, couples straying off under palms, and yes, just a bit of Christmas spirit. I saw one or two Santa hats.



Brian and M Knight start in on the Christmas Night Buffett at Planet Scuba. This was a feast!

Launching Kome Loi (Wish Lanterns)



The Kome Loy is a lantern that is similar to a hot-air-balloon. Because the air lantern must rise up to float in the air, it must be lightweight; therefore, it does not have a bamboo cylinder inside. Instead, it has a lightweight pulpwood frame with silk or light cloth shaped into a cylinder or rectangular shape. In order to send the lantern into the air, it requires a method to heat the air. This is done by tying a small bowl underneath the open section of the

lantern. Oil is then placed into the bowl along with a cotton cloth. As the oil catches fire and commences burning, the hot air quickly travels into the lantern and it soon rises into the air. Click here To see a video of thousands of Kome Loy being launched at the same time.

It is believed that by sending off these lanterns an individual can send one's sins and bad luck into the air. Usually before the lantern soars into the sky, an individual will pray that one's sin or bad luck will be transported on the lantern and floated away high into the sky. Sometimes an address is left inside. The purpose of this is when the lantern come back down to the ground, and individual can follow an address and seek for money from whoever wrote the address. Or even sometimes, the maker will put some money inside the lantern. The purpose of the

hot air lantern is to worship and pay respect to the Phra Ged Kaew Ju La Manee. An old legend tells that during war, these lanterns were sent into enemy territory and exploded.

Today, on Koh Tao, you can buy them for about 200baht (currently about \$6.75US) in almost any store. However, you won't see a lot of lanterns unless it is a holiday like New Years, Christmas, or one of the many SE Asian holidays.

There is nothing like seeing hundreds of lanterns flying up into the sky. Equally, there is nothing more depressing than seeing a novice try to launch one incorrectly, only to watch their wishes crash and burn into the ocean before it is 10 meters in the air.

I helped out two struggling women trying to launch one. It turns out, one was teaching in Bangkok, originally from Mpls.

'Usually before the lantern soars into the sky, an individual will pray that one's sin or bad luck will be transported on the lantern and floated away high into the sky.'



Just before my Christmas Eve Dives. Waiting for Bob, my dive buddy.

We used nitrox36 for the first dive and air for the

Happy Holidays 2008

Singapore! A New Experience



There are heavy fines for Littering, Spitting, J-Walking, and Chewing GUM. Big Brother certainly exists here. There are cameras everywhere!

“This country is a unique place where Malay, Indian, and Chinese cultures meet in an IT city with a heavy Western influence.”



TACO BELL ! This is the first Taco Bell I have had since the summer of 2004. The burrito supreme was amazing.

Have you ever been to Singapore? Do you know where it is? I had to look at a map just to be sure. It lies just South of Malaysia, which is again just south of Thailand. Basically, it lies right on the equator. So, to make it easy for you, open up a world map to the U.S. Run your finger down the map until you get to the equator (that little line that runs East to West across the world, like Route 66 crosses the US). Run your finger to the East (to the right) until your finger is between China and Australia. Along the equator should be a

place called Singapore. It's not a city. It is actually a country!

According to *Lonely Planet*, there are about 4.4 million inhabitants on a landmass of around 700 sq Kilometers (about 272 sq.miles). It is actually an archipelago of 63 islands, but most people stick to the main island.

This country is a unique place where Malay, Indian, and Chinese cultures meet in an IT city with a heavy Western influence. Go that? I guess that is the easiest way to describe it. The other way I could

describe it would be the exact opposite of Cambodia. (see below)

Going from Cambodia to Singapore is like going from eating around the campfire to eat in a five star restaurant.

Singapore “got me” in one way more than anything ... the flow of people. I have never been to a city so big, that people and vehicles move so smoothly. Not only are there tons of people moving everywhere at all times, but the people are from a plethora of different ethnic backgrounds. Amazing.

Top Ten Comparisons between Singapore and Cambodia

Singapore-

10. A beer costs between \$5.00 and \$10.00
9. It is illegal to spit on the ground
8. Littering carries a fine of
7. MRT = Mass Rail Transit - fast, clean, easy. A subway, train, or bus can take you anywhere on the main Island or Sentosa Island.
6. You can SMS the bus depot to find where your bus is and how long you have to wait
5. Everything is automated here
4. Excellent Cinemas— Movies cost \$6.00US
3. The cleanest place I have ever been to (besides Disney World)
2. Traffic is controlled like Big Brother. Every vehicle has a GPS meter which charges different costs depending on traffic congestion.
1. Drug smuggling is punishable by death.

Bottom line: this is a place to raise a family and live an extended amount of time. The high cost of living should be offset by a local paycheck.

Cambodia-

10. A beer costs between \$.50 and \$3.00
9. Spitting and picking your nose are acceptable
8. Littering? No such thing. Trash is meant to be simply thrown on the ground-anywhere.
7. Mass Transit in Cambo is limited to how many fit on a moto (8max) or in a tuk tuk (12or so)
6. No bus. But you can stick your foot out of the apartment and be offered rides from 10 tuk tuks or motos.
5. SMS texts to pay your cell phone bill are the only automated things in Cambodia.
4. Only Khmer language Cinemas - A movie night consists of buying a pirated DVD and watching it at home
3. One of the dirtiest places I have been
2. There is NO control of traffic.
1. You can get a “happy pizza” (hash or marijuana topping) or order a Joint along the main Riverside tourist area

The bottom line: this is a great place to live if you don't have a lot of expectations. I love the third-world atmosphere of Cambodia.

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A Warm Place to Stay

Back in 2004, I became friends with a Canadian family. Grant, Sue, Maria, and Julia were a kind of surrogate family for me in Egypt. Now, Grant (PhyEd) and Sue (ESL) are teaching at the International School of Singapore. They decided to vacation in Australia this holiday season.

So what happens if my friends aren't there when I arrive? Of course, Sue insists that I stay in their apartment! A home away from home.

I got in very late, so their maid left

the key in a hiding place for me. I looked around and found a note by the door. The note was two pages long, listing about 15 different items on it describing everything from using their cell phones to going out for a microbrew.

I was set. What a great opportunity. The funniest thing was the study room. Sue mentioned the laptop (in the study) in her note. I looked all over for the study and could not find it. Since it was the middle of the night, I didn't know the darkened sliding glass doors

opened out to a study and play-room rather than a balcony. Needless to say, it is a very cozy apartment. There is a piano in their living room so I made sure to play it a little every day, just to make sure it was warmed up for Maria when she returned.

Even though Roz, their maid, came daily, I tried to maintain a low perceptibility measure in the apartment. No, I didn't make my bed, but I DID clean up after myself in every respect.

Thank you Walkers!



Just a bus ride away from all the excitement of Singapore shopping is the Spanish Village - casa de Walker!

Riding the Rails

The MRT - Mass Rail Transit and LRT - Light Rail Transit- are pieces of a complex system of buses, trains, and subways. I don't know how frequent trains are in other cities, but I rarely waited longer than a few minutes. I read somewhere that the subways come every three minutes at peak times and about every 6 minutes during off peak times.

EZ passes are easy to come by.

They are basically just swipe cards that can be topped off in any station or 7-Eleven. The swipe card can be used for any of the transport and even like a credit card in some restaurants.

A half block away from Casa del Walker is the 174 bus stop. All of the buses and their times are listed on a board. However, if I wanted to know exactly where the nearest bus was, all I had to

do was SMS text the bus depot and find out. The inner city bus stops have digital boards listing the ETAs and bus numbers, just like every one of the subway stops has ETAs of the next train.

Perhaps part of the ease has to do with English. Everything in Singapore is in English. You will hear and read a lot of different languages in Sing, but English is the lingua franca".

"...all I had to do was SMS text the bus depot and find out....[when the next bus was due to arrive]"

Look at those "Hooters"!

Over the two weeks I had in Singapore, I had to fill my time with some excitement. The MRT was an easy way to get to: the Zoo, Aquarium, Botanical Gardens, Shopping Centers, coffee shops, restaurant rows, even a bird sanctuary! Singapore is full of things to do.

Each day I would set out with a plan to do something new. I went

to a microbrew restaurant on the riverside one day, the zoo another day, etc.

The bird sanctuary really hit home for me. I MRT'd it to the sanctuary just in time for a bird show featuring a toucan. There are about 6,000 birds representing 600 different species of birds at the Jurong Bird Park. I spent about 6 hours wandering around seeing

shows and birds in their environment cages. It was amazing.

Once in a while it is great to have a taste of home. I wandered into a "Hooters" along the riverside. No kidding! Established in 1989, the taste of home included very hot wings, beer, and the token scantily clad women (mostly Philipinas here). Cheers to Matt, Joey, and Mike! Memories of "great wings".



Hooters was right on the Riverfront with all of the other Restaurants. Singapore's Riverfront reminds me of San Antonio - without Fat Tuesdays!

Happy New Year 2008



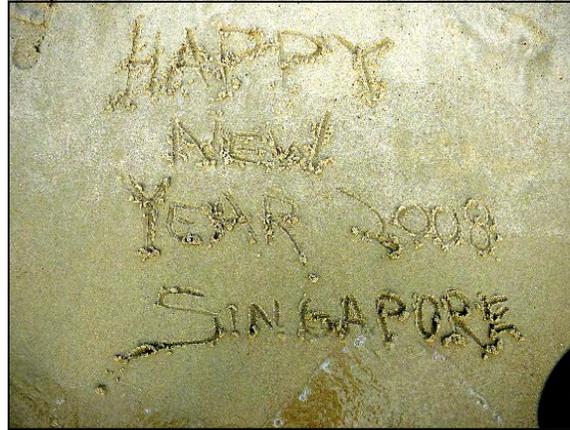
One of the most beautiful views on Koh Tao is overlooking Mango Bay! It is a short, steep moto ride away from the main town area. I recommend this to everyone.

Check out my website:

[www.itre.us/
stsomewhere](http://www.itre.us/sts somewhere)



No, I don't know how THIS got here, but you can see my dad's garage door opener posing next to a Singapore Sling at the Marriott on Orchard Road.



A few years back, my New Year's Resolution was to wake up in a new Country for New Years. So far so good. It must be at least 10 countries and counting. 2008 was Singapore. On the south side of the main island is another, smaller island called Sentosa Island. That is where I spent most of New Years.

The touristy way to get to the island is by Gondola. So I did it. There is a spectacular view of the main island and all the major construction that is happening to add onto Sentosa Island. It is quite amazing how much construction is going into the island. Like most of Singapore, it is all instant and imported. Dump trucks are moving white sands, cranes are moving bundles of iron, and a ton of workers are maintaining a makeshift, temporary cement factory on the little island just to keep up with the amount of cement needed.

My first stop was the aquarium. According to some of the literature and the web, it was touted to be the best aquarium in S.E. Asia. I disagree. The basement aquarium in the Paragon Shopping Center (Bangkok) was a lot better. But I had fun anyway.

Everything, and there is a lot to do, is easily and accessible via the color coded Sentosa Island buses. I had a lot to choose from: three main beaches, go-carts, resort hotels, two 18-hole golf courses, a trapeze school, a butterfly-insect museum (all dead though), and a sky tower— for a panoramic view of the islands. I chose to go to the aquarium (I went through it twice because they had a dragon sea horse display) and the really expensive Siloso Beach Party. I didn't last too long and didn't want to fight crowds getting back into the city. I got to the big, digital, cinema complex in time to catch a midnight showing of "I Am Legend". For once, the popcorn and soda cost LESS than the movie ticket. (The price of cinema snacks in the US is outrageous!!!) Happy New Year! I awoke in a new country once again, safe and healthy.

Ships Passing in the Night

The only negative of the whole trip (besides not seeing the Walkers) was missing Laura. Laura Buchanon is a beautiful woman that was a colleague of mine in Cairo. Now she lives in Singapore. But, she was on Vacation in the Middle East for Christmas. Uggh.

I contacted her on Facebook a few times and she said she was going to return on January 2nd. I didn't know when, and I certainly

didn't want to bother her. I decided to text her late on the 2nd. I didn't get a response and I was having problems changing my flight out on the 3rd, so I decided to head out to the airport and try to miss my flight.

For the first time in my life, I was actually trying to MISS a flight. Just as my taxi started heading towards the airport, Laura calls me and wants to get together. She even offered to make me

dinner if I stayed. Uggh. I told her it was a definite if I missed my flight. The taxi even took me to the wrong terminal. There was traffic all the way to the airport. I STIILL made my flight!!

Well Laura, we will have to make that a raincheck!!

Once again, I wish all of you a Happy New Year 2008, wherever you are in this small world.

-Greg Lemoine