

# Return Trip to Southeast Asia

by Joyce Eisenberg

The dates, flights and hotels for a six-week trip through Asia with my husband, Ted, were plotted on my Excel spreadsheet. We would check out the main attractions: the immense and impressive Noryangjin Fish Market in Seoul; the ancient coins at the Islamic Arts Museum in Kuala Lumpur; a handful of the 2,000 Buddhist temples in Bagan, Myanmar (formerly Burma); and Angkor Wat, a Buddhist religious site originally built for the Hindu god Vishnu that is the world's largest religious monument, in Siem Reap, Cambodia. And when it came time to fill in the blanks on the itinerary, I would look for Jewish sights.

This was Asia, Part II. In 1982, before children and in between Ted's surgical residencies, we spent three months backpacking from Kashmir to Kyoto. Now with the kids out of the house, it was time to see the places we had missed. We would be taking half the time and twice as much luggage. We had more medicine and fewer paperback guidebooks, but we were just as excited.

## YANGON

On TripAdvisor.com's list of top 10 things to see in Yangon, Myanmar's capital, I struck gold: Musmeah Yeshua Synagogue, "the country's only synagogue, a gem hiding in plain sight." After flying all day and all night, we arrived in Yangon mid-morning on Saturday. We checked into our hotel, then rushed out to see the synagogue before it closed at noon.

Our taxi driver dropped us off at a busy downtown intersection and pointed toward a crowded, narrow street. We walked back and forth past stalls brimming with motorcycle parts and patterned longyis, the sarong-like garment worn by both men and women. No luck. We showed the synagogue



*Angkor Wat. All photos by Joyce Eisenberg.*

name and address—written in Burmese—to people squatting in front of their stores. They shook their heads no. The synagogue was not hiding in plain sight. We found help, in English, at The Strand, a landmark colonial hotel. The concierge called the synagogue; the caretaker agreed to wait for us.

And there it was—behind black-and-gold wrought-iron gates, its name spelled out in block letters below a gold mosaic menorah. Musmeah Yeshua's caretaker, Jolly Albert, told us his name but little else. He handed Ted a kippah and escorted us into the white stone building that was built in 1896, a two-story Sephardic beauty with stained-glass windows, a central bimah and a women's gallery.

Albert conducted his tour mostly by pointing: He showed us two Iraqi silver Torah scrolls and a newspaper clipping of David Ben-Gurion's 1961 visit with U Ba Swe, the second prime



**Musmeah Synagogue.**

minister of Burma; both were leaders of countries that gained their independence from Britain in 1948. Musmeah Yeshua at one time boasted 126 Torah scrolls, brought by Jews who came to Burma during the British colonial era to work in the teakwood trade. Once there were 3,000 Jews, a Jewish mayor of Rangoon (Yangon's former name) and a Jewish school. Today, fewer than 20 Jews remain.

## PHNOM PENH

When I had realized we would be in Phnom Penh on Erev Rosh Hashanah last year, I googled "Cambodian Jews." Two clicks later, I had signed up for Chabad's evening service and New Year's dinner. Fast-forward two weeks: Our itinerary for September 13 read "The Killing Fields and Rosh Hashanah dinner."

I know a good deal about the Holocaust, having edited the autobiographies of two male survivors in their 80s. But I knew little about the Cambodian genocide and was curious about the similarities between the two atrocities. My curiosity was answered at the Choeung Ek Genocidal Center, nine miles outside of Phnom Penh, one of Cambodia's infamous killing fields and a mass grave to thousands.

Between 1975 and 1979, under Pol Pot's brutal Khmer Rouge regime, about 25 percent of Cambodia's seven million people died from torture, starvation, slave labor, disease or murder as the dictator set about to create a pure agrarian society.

Ted and I walked along paths past the executioner's office and a storage room for killing tools as we listened on our headsets

to survivors' heartbreaking stories—the murder of an infant, being saved by a stranger's sacrifice. It had rained that morning, and scraps of clothing, bones and teeth had come to the soil's surface in the bowl-shaped burial pits.

In the dome-topped memorial building, a 200-foot-tall Buddhist stupa, more than 8,000 human skulls are arranged by gender and age and exhibited behind clear glass. It was horrible and fascinating and foreign.

Closer to the city, we visited S-21, the Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum, a former high school that the Khmer Rouge used as a secret prison. Of the 12,000 people imprisoned here, only 12 survived. In the courtyard outside, we encountered two of the survivors, who come to the museum most days to meet with tourists and share their stories. Chum Mey, 85, a mechanic, was kept alive because he could repair the typewriters his torturers used to record forced confessions. Artist Bou Meng, 75, painted lifelike portraits of Pol Pot from photographs.



**Joyce and Ted embark on their return trip to Southeast Asia ...**



**...thirty years after their first excursion to the region.**

It took several hours and a change of scenery for us to leave the horrors of genocide behind. Back in central Phnom Penh, across the street from the Russian market, a tchotchke paradise, we found just what we needed: comfort food. On the menu at Café Yejj, between chicken satay and sticky pork belly bites, was a bagel with cream cheese and smoked salmon.

The bagels were a welcome Jewish bridge to how we would be spending our evening: celebrating the New Year with Chabad in the elegant ballroom of the Himawari Hotel.

After a 20-minute service, we sat down at our dinner table, elaborately laden with a small round challah, apples and honey, hummus, beet salad and a fried fish head. Mandlen were floating in pumpkin soup, not chicken soup. The pomegranate seeds, locally sourced, were yellow, not red. The brisket, imported from South Africa, was served with rice rather than potatoes.

Our tablemates were all American. We met a New York prosecutor and a Boston judge who were serving on the United Nations-backed Cambodian war crimes tribunal, which had just begun hearing its first cases against former leaders of the Khmer Rouge.

A young woman in her 20s had learned Khmer and translated the poetry of Cambodian refugees during college. She was living in Phnom Penh and worked for the Khmer Times. A businessman who had sold his pet food company to Nestlé was exploring new Cambodian-based opportunities, including a competitor for Sriracha, the Thai hot sauce, as well as a new pharmaceutical use for silkworms.

## HANOI

With its tangle of 13th-century streets lined with stores selling silks, spices and bamboo mats, Hanoi fit our mental picture of a Southeast Asian city. Nguyen Hong Phuong, a tour guide who goes by the name of Smiley, took us to the city's must-see sight, Ho Chi Minh's home and museum.



*Ho Chi Minh statue in Hanoi.*

We ate local for lunch: big bowls of pho served with guai (crispy donuts) for dipping or banh mi sandwiches. Each

lunch for two cost 56,000 dong, or \$2.50. We had planned to stick with the eminently affordable and delicious Vietnamese food—until we saw an advertisement for Daluva, a restaurant owned by an Israeli transplant.



*Ted and Joyce at the Shwedagon Pagoda.*

It was a Monday night and the restaurant was quiet, so owner and chef Shay Lubin, 37, sat down with us to schmooze. Lubin had come to Southeast Asia in 2009 on a quest for relaxation. He had planned to travel for just a year, but Hanoi's charm and a business opportunity kept him there. He had been cooking his whole life: as a boy in Israel, where he was born, and in Philadelphia, his father's hometown, after his army service. He had spent his 20s working in various restaurant kitchens. In 2013, he opened Daluva, a gastropub whose menu ranges from Tunisian salmon stew and pulled eggplant sandwiches to macaroni and cheese and Philly cheesesteak. (Lubin's menu is decidedly *treyf*.)

A few questions later, and Ted discovered that the restaurateur's dad was Freddy Lubin, a classmate at Overbrook High School. A small world after all.

There were many extraordinary sights on our trip. Yangon's gilded Shwedagon Pagoda, home to eight strands of a Buddha's hair, was topped with a crown of thousands of rubies and diamonds. The nighttime view from our hotel window of Kuala Lumpur's Petronas Twin Towers was stunning—the two giants seemed to belong on another planet.

But what moved us the most were the extraordinary personal connections, Jewish and non-Jewish.

## WHAT TO SEE: MYANMAR

### Musmeah Yeshua Synagogue

With its black-and-white checkered marble floor, blue-tipped columns and arches, crystal memorial lamps and wooden benches with rattan backs, the synagogue in Yangon is striking. Since his father, Moses, died, Sammy Samuels has moved back to Yangon from New York City to help revitalize the community ([myanmarshalom.com](http://myanmarshalom.com)). For Hanukkah, he expects 180 guests at the synagogue—Jews and non-Jews, leaders from Muslim, Christian, Hindu, Baha'i and Buddhist faiths.

### Shwedagon Pagoda

Allow 2 to 3 hours to see this stunning, 2,500-year-old golden Buddhist pagoda in Yangon ([shwedagonpagoda.com](http://shwedagonpagoda.com)), the world's oldest. Licensed guides are available at the site. Dress modestly and be prepared to walk barefoot here and at all Buddhist temples.

### Bagan Archaeological Zone

Between the 11th and 13th centuries, the kings of then Pagan built over 10,000 Buddhist temples on this 26-square-mile plain; more than 2,200 remain. Though you can take a motorbike or a horse cart, it's hot and dusty so a knowledgeable guide with an air-conditioned car is highly recommended. Sunrise hot-air ballooning and sunset views from atop the temples are highlights; try *Balloons Over Bagan*.

## WHAT TO SEE: MALAYSIA

### Petronas Twin Towers

Kuala Lumpur's imposing towers, built by Cesar Pelli, are the tallest twin structures in the world. You can visit the Skybridge and the Observation Deck for dazzling city views. Sunset is the best time to visit. Tickets often sell out—plan in advance.

## WHAT TO SEE: CAMBODIA

### Angkor Archaeological Park

The remains of the capitals of the Khmer Empire (ninth to 15th centuries) in Siem Reap stretch over 150 square miles; the main attractions are Angkor Wat, Angkor Thom, Bayon Temple and Ta Prohm. Passes are available for one, three and seven days. Guides can help you see the best sites while avoiding the crowds. Ratanak Eath was stellar.

### Chabad Jewish Center

Chabad moved into a new, larger building in December 2015 to serve the 150 Jews in Phnom Penh and the 100 or so others in the rest of Cambodia. There are weekly Shabbat dinners with homemade challah and gefilte fish and Saturday morning services year-round.

### The Choeng Ek Genocidal Center

Thousands of Cambodians are buried in mass graves at Choeng Ek, a soccer-field sized area that was once an orchard.

### Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum

Rooms in this former prison are lined floor to ceiling with black-and-white mug shots of prisoners.

## WHAT TO SEE: VIETNAM

### Ho Chi Minh Mausoleum Complex

In Hanoi you'll find all things Ho—the Presidential Palace; his Stilt House, where he preferred to reside; the Lenin-style Mausoleum, where his embalmed body is on display; and the museum, which documents his revolutionary struggles and victories. It's worth hiring a local guide to hear the story of the Vietnam War from the other side.

*Joyce Eisenberg is the co-author, with Ellen Scolnic, of *The Whole Spiel*: Funny essays about digital nudniks, seder selfies and chicken soup memories.*